Helpful or Harmful? The Integration of Career Learning in the Danish Upper Secondary Curriculum

RESEARCH

LAURA FELBY

STOCKHOLM UNIVERSITY PRESS

ABSTRACT

In Denmark, there has been an increased focus in education and guidance policy on teachers' responsibilities concerning career and career education. Teachers are now expected to integrate career education into the curriculum across the educational sector. This study investigates how teachers and students construct career learning as a new educational concept and how teachers integrate or fail to integrate it into the curriculum and their everyday practice. The empirical foundation of this paper is an ethnographic study that consists of observations and interviews with ten teachers and thirteen students in Danish upper secondary education. Through a semantic analysis inspired by Niklas Luhmann, an analytical framework of six semantic positions within career and guidance theory was developed. These were "choice", "adaption", "development", "learning", "change", and "coincidence". This study indicates that Danish students and teachers construct career learning differently. Five categories describe the students and teachers conflictual. These revolved around an ongoing conflict about the helpfulness or harmfulness of career learning. While students tend to construct career learning as helpful through the semantics of "choice", "development", and "adaptability", the teachers predominantly saw this construction as harmful – to the students and their practice. Instead, the teachers sought to construct career learning concerning the semantics of "learning" and "change" – or reject it as an educational concept.

ABSTRAKT

I Danmark er der igennem de seneste år kommet et øget fokus på læreres ansvar i relation til studerendes karrierekompetence og karrierelæring, og i dele af uddannelsessektoren forventes det nu, at lærere integrere f.eks. karrierelæring i deres undervisning. Dette studie har til formål at undersøge, hvordan lærere og elever i gymnasieskolen konstruerer karrierelæring som begreb i relation til deres undervisning. Empirisk hviler studiet på en etnografisk undersøgelse bestående af observationer og interviews med 10 lærere og 13 elever på tre forskellige case-gymnasier. Den teoretiske ramme bygger på Niklas Luhmanns systemteori. Med udgangspunkt i teorien udvikles der en analytisk ramme for karriere- og vejledningsteori bestående af seks semantiske positioner; "valg", "tilpasning", "udvikling", "læring", "forandring" og "tilfældighed". Studiet peger på, at elever og lærere konstruerer karrierelæring forskelligt. Med udgangspunkt i de semantiske positioner identificeres der fem områder, der alle

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Laura Felby

Aarhus University, DK

lcf@au.dk

KEYWORDS:

Career learning; career education; curriculum theory; upper secondary education; Nicklas Luhmann

SØGEORD:

Karrierelæring; karriere uddannelse; læseplansteori; gymnasiale uddannelser; Nicklas Luhmann

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Felby, L. (2022). Helpful or Harmful? The Integration of Career Learning in the Danish Upper Secondary Curriculum. *Nordic Journal of Transitions, Careers and Guidance*, 3(1), pp. 16–29. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16993/njtcg.50

kredser om en vedvarende konflikt mellem, hvorvidt karrierelæring er hjælpsom eller skadelig. Med udgangspunkt i de semantiske positioner argumenteres der for, at mens elever har en tendens til at konstruere karrierelæring som hjælpsom gennem de semantiske positioner "valg", "udvikling" og "tilpasning", ser lærerne overvejende denne konstruktion som skadelig – for eleverne og deres praksis. I stedet ønsker lærerne at konstruere karrierelæring i forhold til semantikkerne "læring" og "forandring" – eller blot afvise det som et element i undervisningen.

DOI: 10.16993/njtcg.50

During an educational reform in 2017, career learning was implemented in Denmark as a new educational concept in the upper secondary school. In the public policy papers, following different rationales were articulated for integrating career learning; 1) to develop students' career competencies, 2) to strengthen their academic and vocational development, 3) as well as their formation (the German term Bildung) (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2021; Ministry of Children and Education, 2016). All subjects across the upper secondary school were required to integrate career learning into the curriculum. However, there was no guidance on how (a fixed curriculum) or when (scheduled hours) to do this. This meant that teachers – some without prior knowledge of career as an educational concept – became responsible for this subject-specific integration.

The tendency to use teachers as facilitators for career learning, career development and career education and integrate it into the curriculum is not unique to the Danish educational system (Poulsen & Buland, 2020). An increased interest in the relationship between teachers and counsellors can be seen in different contexts and countries (e.g. The Careers and Enterprise Company, 2022; Haug et al., 2019, 2020; Poulsen, 2020; Poulsen & Buland, 2020; Røise, 2020).

Previous research in Denmark shows that 'career' as an educational concept is hard to understand and implement for teachers and non-specialists who lack knowledge of the theoretical aspects (The Danish Evaluation Institute & Rambøll, 2019; Skovhus & Felby, 2020). While the theoretical field of career education, guidance and counselling has evolved, it seems that an everyday understanding of what a career is has remained rather static (e.g. Prvulovic, 2020; Skovhus & Felby, 2020; Thomsen, 2014; Watts et al., 2015). This ethnographic study explores how career learning is constructed and integrated as a new educational concept in Danish upper secondary schools. Two main questions were addressed: 1) how do Danish teachers and students construct career learning as an educational concept? and 2) what meaning do Danish teachers and students attribute to career learning as an educational concept?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing on German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's (1995) social systems theory, society is not constructed by individuals but by systems. In modern society, systems are comprised of functionally differentiated systems and are self-referential and autopoietic (Luhmann, 1995). This means that the "closed" social system creates and maintains itself and cannot operate outside its border (Luhmann, 1995). Thus, each system constantly creates itself by drawing a border between itself and the environment. The border between the system and the environment is drawn based on a specific function, code, medium and program. Most relevant for this study, the education system has the primary function 'Education', and the secondary function 'Career selection'; the code 'better ⅂ worse'; the medium 'the child' and 'vita'; and the program 'curriculum' according to Luhmann (1995). The functionally differentiated society is reliant on organisations. Organisations draw on one systemic reference and its codes. For instance, upper secondary school(s) are linked to the education system, drawing on its code, medium and program. However, in contrast to the overall functional system, organisations must, in practice, handle the codes of other functional systems. For example, upper secondary school(s) must handle the medium (power) and program (ideologies) of the political system.

The above does not mean that a system cannot communicate with other systems. They can and do, but communication "is not understood as an exchange process." (Stichweh, 2011, p. 6). Instead, systems can either accept or reject communication from other systems. How different systems understand and accept or reject communication is entirely up to the system and its way of processing communication and information through the concept of meaning.

DOI: 10.16993/njtcg.50

Luhmann defines meaning as "the link between the actual and the possible" (Luhmann, 1985, p. 102). Thus, meaning reduces complexity in the meeting between system and environment through a dynamic process; the system will constantly take something in (actual) and simultaneously reject something else (possible). Meaning is expressed in three different dimensions; the fact dimension (the difference between this ⌉ something else), the social dimension (the difference between ego ⌉ alter) and the temporal dimension (the difference between the past as understood in the present ⌉ future as understood in the present). One consequence of this dynamic understanding of meaning is that a system constantly evolves and forces change. Based on this understanding, all systems – including educational actors, such as schools, teachers and students – are identity-creating and -evolving through meaning-making and communication.

There are several strong arguments for why systems theory is a suitable theoretical framework when analysing meaning-making and the construction of new educational concepts, such as career learning. First, based on the focus on system and environment, it can be used to illuminate the independence and inherent autonomy that exists between different actors (e.g. students, teachers, educational leaders, policy makers etc.) within the educational system. Second, the theory can be used to accommodate the dialogue that necessarily exists between different actors. Finally, through the focus on communication and meaning, the theory is applicable when observing and describing how career learning is communicated in different systems, contributing to the overall understanding of career learning as an educational concept.

However, using social systems theory as a theoretical backdrop also has implications for the analytical strategy. It is often used primarily as an analytical theory and, to a lesser extent, as a methodological theory. Luhmann developed a theory of society as well as a theory of observation. Others, including Andersen (2003), have since continued to work with systems theory as an analytical strategy, to include considerations about method choice and empirical analysis. This paper draws specifically on the semantic analysis (Andersen, 2003; Luhmann, 1995; Luhmann & Schorr, 2000), which will be described in the following section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The semantic analysis (Luhmann, 1995; Luhmann & Schorr, 2000) was applied to "clarify the underlying and implicit distinctions constituting ideas, thoughts, [and red.] symbols" (Sohn, 2021, p. 218). The semantic analysis focuses on "how meaning is formed and how it is conditioned into a number of concepts, which together form a semantic reservoir of meaning that is then made available to communication" (Andersen, 2011, p. 252). While the meaning is defined as the unity of the distinction between actuality ⌉ potentiality (Luhmann, 1995), semantics are more stable, generalised forms of meaning, concepts and ideas that can be used and communicated for a more extended period. Thus, when applying a semantic analysis in the reading of career- and guidance theory, the semantics can be seen as a theoretical construct, used as guiding categories in the empirical research (Sohn, 2021), and this case, in the analysis.

How career learning is constructed among teachers is under-researched, as it has historically not been an active part of their tasks. According to Andrews (2011) most literature on career learning – and career education – relates to counsellors teaching career learning. The following introduces a semantic analysis of career and guidance theory selected based on two criteria: 1) career and guidance theory that is relevant in an educational context and 2) career and guidance theory that provides a basis or possibilities for (didactic) action in an educational context. This analysis provides some answers to which understandings of career are pertinent to the communication and the construction of career learning as an educational concept.

Based on the semantic analysis, this paper focuses on six semantic positions and is organised based on Killeen (1996) in Table 1.

Table 1 Semantic position.

	THE INDIVIDUAL	THE CONTEXT AND THE STRUCTURES
Agent	Choice	Learning
Environment	Adaptability	Change
Action	Development	Coincidence

DOI: 10.16993/njtcg.50

SEMANTIC POSITIONS STARTING FROM THE INDIVIDUAL

The individual takes centre stage in many careers and guidance theories (e.g. Gati & Tal, 2008; Killeen, 1996; Leung, 2008; Plant, 2020). Among the selected career and guidance theories, the more individual-focused theories (described below), three semantic positions emerge: "choice", "adaptability", and "development".

The semantic position "choice" is defined by theories with a consistent focus on the individual and psychological factors as primary explanations for choice processes. Thus, a career perspective that focuses on "choice" is centred around the person who has a career. Holland's trait and factor theory is an essential theoretical and practical framework concerning this semantic position (Holland, 1997; Killeen, 1996; Leung, 2008). The theory represents a rational choice approach and is widely used (Højdal, 2020, p. 27). However, most – if not all – career and guidance theories relate implicitly or explicitly to career choices and processes. Processes related to choices are natural and vital aspects of an individual's career (e.g. Gati & Tal, 2008) and the modern educational system (e.g. Skovhus, 2018; Skovhus & Felby, 2020; Watts et al., 2015).

The semantic position "adaptability" is defined by those theories that place the individual's adaptability to their social environment at the centre of the theory. Savickas' (2002) theory and practical development fit this semantic position. In this theory, adaptation is a primary condition; human beings adapt to their work, relationships, culture and society's expectations. Career adaptability deals with (constant) adaptation, which concentrates on the individual's work role, including social expectations that the individual meets in different positions and roles (Savickas, 2002; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012).

The semantic position "development" is defined by theories focusing on lifelong individual development as the centre for guidance and practice (e.g. Gottfredson, 2002; Super, 1980). This positioning points to the individual having a particular perception of self that develops at different stages throughout life (e.g. Andrews, 2011; Killeen, 1996; Super, 1980). Development is linked both to the individual and the context and to conscious and unconscious actions (Gottfredson, 2002; Super, 1980).

SEMANTIC POSITIONS STARTING FROM THE CONTEXT AND THE STRUCTURES.

Among the selected career and guidance theories, the more context and structure-focused career and guidance theories, three additional semantic positions emerge: "learning", "change", and "coincidence". As in the previous semantic positions, these positions centre around the person who has a career ("learning"), the environment ("change"), and conscious and unconscious actions ("coincidence").

The semantic position "learning" represents theories that focus on a more open and holistic understanding of what a career is and the individual's contextual and structural bases for their career choice (e.g. Dodd & Hooley, 2018; Irving, 2018; Law, 2017; Watts et al., 2015). In these theories, careers as a concept and learning about careers seek to capture the complexity of lived life. In addition, the theories emphasise that a career mirrors the individual's values concerning their understanding of work, abilities, interests, resources and what a meaningful life means (Dodd & Hooley, 2018; Irving, 2018). Career learning refers to learning about formal and informal education and paid and unpaid work (e.g. Watts et al., 2015). Most theories in this semantic position are based on social learning theory, whereas career learning is based on social processes (Killeen, 1996; Law, 2017).

The semantic position "change" is defined by theories emphasising change in the individual, societal structures and social justice (Hooley, 2015; Hooley et al., 2018, 2019; Irving, 2018). With this semantic position, career learning should focus on social structures and how inequality, contextual factors and injustice affect individuals, their careers (choices) and their overall path in life. At the same time, the focus is on how individuals and groups can challenge and change these structures (Hooley, 2015).

The last semantic position is "coincidence". In this semantic position, theoretical concepts such as 'positive uncertainty' (e.g. Gelatt, 1989) and 'planned happenstance' (e.g. Mitchell et al., 1999) are present. Concepts constructed through oxymorons point toward the ambivalence, flexibility and randomness that characterise career exploration and development (Amundson

& Thrift, 2008). Another theory in this semantic position is the chaos theory of careers (Bright & Pryor, 2005).

METHOD

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

In Denmark, there are ten years of compulsory education. In the latter part of compulsory school, students chose either vocational or upper secondary education. If they choose vocational education, they gain specific professional qualifications e.g. towards a trade, while general upper secondary education provides students with broader qualifications, making them eligible for higher education.

General upper secondary school (age 15/16 to 18/19) exists in four different forms: HTX ('Higher Technical Examination Programme"), HHX ("Higher Commercial Examination Programme"), HF ("Higher Preparatory Examination Programme") and STX ("Higher General Examination Programme") (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020).

While the HTX and HHX programs focus on specific disciplines (technological and scientific subjects and business and socioeconomic disciplines, respectively), HF and STX offer a broad range of subjects within social or natural science and the humanities. Since 2017, all four upper secondary school types have shared the same legislation and purpose: preparation for further studies, including Bildung, knowledge and competencies (Act on Upper Secondary School, 2021).

This study focuses on STX – the Higher General Examination Programme. STX is the most common upper secondary path for Danish youth (Gymnasieskolerne lærerforening, 2020). Teachers at STX are predominantly academically qualified for a teaching position through a discipline-specific master's degree (for instance, studying Physics at university qualifies one to teach Physics in general upper secondary school). Once one has employment, one can be offered and enrolled in a postgraduate Diploma of Education ("pædagogikum"), where newly employed teachers learn about teaching, learning and didactics, while reflecting on and developing their own (approach to) teaching.

EMPIRICAL DESIGN

Data in this paper draws on a case study of three STX schools in different contexts, one urban, one provincial and one rural. Empirical data were collected at the three schools through observations, formal interviews and informal conversations periodically over 14 months. Ten teachers volunteered and participated in the project. The participants had between four and 20 years of experience in the educational sector, mainly from the Higher General Examination Programme (STX). Table 2 provides an overview of the participants' teaching profiles. Classroom observations were conducted during the participants' classroom teaching in the selected study programs. During the observations, the role of the researcher was mainly that of the 'minimally participant observer' (Bryman, 2016, p. 436). In addition, two interviews with each of the ten teachers were conducted. The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide (added as an appendix).

Table 2 Participants' teaching profile.

CASE SCHOOL	GENDER	AGE	YEARS OF EXPERIENCE	SUBJECT FIELD
Urban	Male	30s	10	Mathematics, English
Urban	Male	30s	10	Social Studies, English
Urban	Female	60s	30	Danish, Religious Studies
Provincial	Male	30s	10	History, Physical Education
Provincial	Female	30s	5	Danish, Psychology
Provincial	Male	50s	20	Mathematics, Chemistry
Provincial	Male	30s	5	English, History
Rural	Female	60s	35	Mathematics, Danish
Rural	Male	60s	40	Danish, Art
Rural	Male	60s	10	Biology, Chemistry

DOI: 10.16993/njtcg.50

Drawing on the systems theoretical framework (la Cour et al., 2005), the interviews were seen as social constructs, not as representations of reality. In addition, at each school, group interviews with four to five students (N = 13) were conducted. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

Each case school represented different study programmes to include various subject areas. At STX, students choose a study programme during their first semester. The study programme is selected based on the student's motivation, preferences and ideas about their future – primarily academic and vocational. Table 3 provides an overview of the distribution of the students and their study program.

Table 3 Students.

CASE SCHOOL	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS	YEAR OF STUDY	STUDY PROGRAM
Urban	5	3rd	A-level Social Science/A-level English
Provincial	4	3rd	A-level Biotechnology/A-level Mathematics/A-level Physics
Rural	4	3rd	A-level Mathematics/B-level Physics/B-level Chemistry

DATA ANALYSIS

This study coded and analysed data using an abductive data analysis based on a systems theoretical approach (Andersen, 2003; Luhmann, 1995). The empirical data were condensed and coded in three stages. At the first stage, the transcribed interviews were read based on a second-order observation with the distinction' career learning, career competencies and career perspective ⅂ everything else'. This reading implies an initial reduction of the empirical data – everything that did not meet the requirements of the first distinction was excluded for further investigation. The second stage further strengthened the analysis by systematically observing the six semantics from the selected career and guidance theories. The third stage consisted of a new second-order observation (Andersen, 2003), where the included data was categorised into data units. These units are used as a structure for the results. The three stages are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4 Analytical movement.

EXAMPLE OF DATA	STAGE 1	STAGE 2	STAGE 3
"I can hardly describe how big an opponent I am of that result-management regime" (Interview, teacher from the provincial school)	'Everything else ⅂ career learning, career competencies and career perspective' Excluded	X	X
"For me, what is positive about this, is the life competence that lies in daring to make choices. So if I can bring that into my teaching through the concept of career learning, that is fine by me – then they [the politicians red.] are more than welcome to call it career learning." (interview with teacher from the rural school)	'career learning, career competencies and career perspective ⅂ everything else.' Included	Career perspective as "choice." Explicit link to career.	Systemic pressure ⅂ individual pressure
"[When choosing education red.] there is rarely one right path to choose. One path leads to A, and another path leads to B. Nevertheless, it could also be that the paths cross along the way. And you cannot know that when you choose" (Interview with a teacher from the rural school)	'career learning, career competencies and career perspective ⅂ everything else.' Included	Career perspective as "coincidence." Explicit link to career	Coincidence ⅂ seriatim choices Complexity ⅂ Reduction

FINDINGS

The following section of this article describes the main findings from the observations and interviews with students and teachers. In the process of condensing and coding the data, five categories of meaning were detected.

DOI: 10.16993/njtcg.50

WHAT IS A CAREER – AND WHO HAS IT?

Firstly, it was important to understand how the concept of *a career* was constructed by the students and teachers. What was a career, who had a career, and how did one get a career? It was essential because an understanding of a career could inhibit or facilitate further construction of career (learning) as a didactical and educational concept.

Overall, both students and teachers had a relatively narrow understanding of what a career is. Both parties agreed that a career was entirely linked to the labour market, making further education a stepping-stone towards a (future) career. Not surprisingly perhaps their understanding of a career was closely related to the everyday understanding of a career, understood as a hierarchical, linear individualistic progression through the labour market/paid work (e.g. Watts et al., 2015).

However, many teachers were very vocal about the fact that "career" was a *"bad word"*. As one teacher (urban school) commented *"It is okay in Jobindex [a Danish job site red.] and places like that, but not in upper secondary. I just do not like it"*. Another teacher (provincial school) simply said, *"the word career does not fit in upper secondary school"*. Here, the teachers rejected career learning as an educational concept because it conflicted with their understanding of the purpose of education, drawing on the code of the education system (better ┐worse). For them, the purpose of schooling was primarily about Bildung, which can be defined as *"a person's becoming a subject, a human being's attempt to overcome external determination and infancy' by learning certain knowledge, but also achieving a certain set of skills."* (Siljander et al., 2012, p. 304). In fact, it might seem that for the teachers career learning was the opposite of Bildung.

In addition, the teachers tended to connect the word 'career' with other types of work than their own. For instance, a teacher (rural school) stated that *"she does not have a career; she has a job"*. Drawing on the semantics, the teachers implicitly connected their dislike of the word career to the more individualistic semantics of "choice", "adaptability", and "development".

In contrast to the teachers, the students did not necessarily see a career as a bad thing or a bad word. However, they did not see their current (upper secondary) and future education (higher education) as an active part of their career. Thus, education was managed in the present, while "career" was something unmanageable in the future. The latter was something on which both students and teachers agreed.

While most of the teachers in this study used their understanding to argue why career learning should not be an educational concept, the students used their understanding to argue why a career should be an educational subject.

INDIVIDUAL OR STRUCTURAL SEMANTICS?

As indicated above, the teachers and students did not construct career learning as an educational concept in the same manner, nor did their constructions have the same outcomes.

Using the analytical framework developed through the literature review, the students tended to have a construction aligned with the more individual semantic positions ("choice", "adaptability" and "development"). They could see the potential in integrating career learning from their point of view – and they would like to hear more about their future options ("choice") and how they could use their current knowledge in their future work life ("adaptability"). They matched their current understanding of themselves to their future self and the people around them ("development"). However, the students included the semantic "coincidence" in their construction, especially in their more critical reflections on career learning as an educational concept.

Unlike the students, the teachers constructed career learning around the more contextual and structural-semantic positions of "learning", "change", and "coincidence". They could, to some degree, see positive aspects in constructing and integrating career learning through collective reflections on subject-specific elements' relevance ("learning"), through reflections on how to be a good and critical-reflexive citizen in a democratic society ("change") and illustrate non-linear ways through life and education ("coincidence").

DOI: 10.16993/njtcg.50

Overall, students and teachers tended to include one semantic position at a time in their construction while simultaneously excluding another, either directly or indirectly. Keeping one semantic in the system, excluding another from the environment.

One recurrent example of this was the teachers' exclusion of the semantic "learning" when including "choice". Overall, most teachers struggled to find positive aspects of career learning. The ones mentioned above were sparse. When they were critical of career learning as an educational concept, the teachers relied primarily on individual semantics – especially "choice", thus excluding "learning". They did not see it as their responsibility as teachers to push the students more quickly through the educational system. They did not wish, as a teacher (urban school) stated to "*go from life learning to business learning*". Moreover, the teachers also articulated career learning regarding choice as reflecting a political, neo-liberal agenda they did not wish to be part of, again drawing on their own systems reference and rejecting the political.

SYSTEMIC OR INDIVIDUAL PRESSURE?

As mentioned in the section above, teachers found arguments for rejecting career learning by distancing themselves from what they saw as a political project and rejecting the function and code of the political system. On this, the students and teachers agreed. Both parties argued that career learning was introduced politically to force students through the educational system on time:

> *"They just want us [the students red.] out of the education system faster, and if you are more focused on career learning, then you choose an education faster, you finish faster, and you get out faster and contribute to the economy and society*" (student interview – Urban).

In the introduction, it was mentioned that politicians' primary motivation for integrating career learning as an educational concept was to develop students' career competence and strengthen their academic and vocational development and their Bildung. However, students and teachers saw this as an unnecessary and, in many ways, unrealistic systemic pressure on the students.

The students and teachers were not in agreement about whether career learning should be considered an overall individual pressure. In the interviews with students and teachers, several students focused on how they could use a specific education or subject to choose a job and pave the way for as many possibilities and choices as possible through high grades. While the students did not articulate this as something particularly bad, the teachers did, one teacher stating that:

> *"We have been affected by a performance culture to a great extent. (...) And concerning that, I do not think it helps to talk about careers, their futures and so on, because then they connect it to grade point averages and entry requirements and not to opportunities. They see far more limitations when we look at those aspects"* (teacher interview – Rural)

Students and teachers addressed limitations and possibilities in including career learning in the curriculum. However, the students concluded that the possibilities outweighed the limitations, while the teachers, once again, came to the opposite conclusion.

SERIATIM CHOICES?

As stated above, the semantic position of "choice" is prominent in the data. However, it was not entirely positive or negative among the participants. For the students, the semantic of "choice" was mainly seen as positive, while for the teachers, it was more negative. Yet, the students and teachers used the same starting point to argue for and against the integration of career learning in the educational and didactical setting.

Contrary to their teachers, the students did not negatively mark the semantic position of "choice". In their construction of career learning, they highlighted the semantic position of "choice" as a positive (potential) outcome of career learning; choices that could be addressed

DOI: 10.16993/njtcg.50

in an educational context were, from their perspective, both relevant and motivating. Initially, students focused on the choice of education and, as a consequence, on the choice of work/job.

While the teachers concluded that an increased focus on choice (thus including "choice" and excluding "learning") would pressurise the students and create a discourse of seriatim choices as a norm, the students concluded that career learning and a focus on choices could help illuminate that work, education and life, in general, were not linear ("coincidence" and "learning"). One student (provincial school) argued that career learning should be constructed in a manner that could *"focus on the fact that there are several paths, and education does not keep one locked in position. It can remove the feeling of participating in a race about grades if one is aware of multiple paths."*.

COMPLEXITY AND REDUCTION

The students knew they had to choose something and risk making the wrong choice. Because of this, they felt that choices were marked by uncertainty ("coincidence"). This created a paradox. On the one hand, they sought to alleviate that uncertainty by gaining more knowledge about their options through career learning, while on the other, they sought not to have too many options. Thus, in their construction of meaningful career learning, the students actively sought ways to increase their knowledge of opportunities, make active selections, and thereby reduce complexity.

Here the teachers did not feel that they had the competencies to help students articulate their knowledge about opportunities; nor did they feel that students regarded them as sources for information when it came to reflections on careers:

> *"I do not think I have the know-how to address it. I can say a little about the two specific educations I have studied: English and History at a specific university. And then it would just be my own opinion about that. However, if they asked about it, I would happily talk to them in a slightly more formalised framework."* (teacher interview – Provincial)

The students also addressed the issue openly about not seeing their teachers as relevant sources when reflecting on careers or further education. According to students, career learning should be facilitated by those adults classed as supervisors and counsellors within their upper secondary school (e.g. someone they knew). One student stated, *"if you have a problem, you wish to talk to someone you know, and not a stranger at a study café"* (student interview – Urban). In other words, according to students' career learning should be detached from regular subject-specific teaching, which is in direct contrast with the intention of the political system. The students emphasised the value of career learning through extra-curricular activities, such as visits to higher education institutions and companies. The findings demonstrate that teachers played a minor role in this framing.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings highlight a pattern of different attributions of meaning to the career learning. As a starting point, both students and teachers reflected on the same thing – the construction of meaningful career learning in the upper secondary curriculum. However, their understanding and criteria for either inclusion or exclusion contrast with each other in virtually all areas. When applying this finding to the theoretical framework, it can be argued that the subsystems (students and teachers) accepted and/or rejected the communication from the political system. Firstly, the students were aware of a discourse of individual and systemic pressure to choose and perform. They appear to agree that career learning could relieve some of that pressure. In contrast, the teachers were aware of the same individual and systemic pressure on their students and argued that career learning might reinforce some of that pressure. Secondly, the students were aware of a potential political and social pressure to see choices as linear or even seriatim, with one choice leading naturally to the next. They argued that career learning could relieve some of that pressure. And in contrast, the teachers were aware of the same discourse and actively sought to shield their students from that pressure by rejecting career learning from the curriculum. Finally, the students wanted to both increase and decrease the complexity

DOI: 10.16993/njtcg.50

they experienced in the world – especially related to choices of education and vocation and their future in general. They found that career learning was a means to do this. While the teachers were also aware of this complexity, they expressed a concern that career learning might distract students from how complex the world is.

Several interrelated points emerge from the empirical data when anchoring the analysis and discussion in systems theory. These include the construction of career learning as an educational concept concerning 1) meaning-making, 2) communication and 3) the education systems function and code. These are explained in the following sections.

Meaning-making: When using systems theory as the theoretical building block in the analysis, meaning-making becomes an essential part of the construction of career learning. Through the theoretical concept of meaning, the education system, teachers and students put something in the foreground (the actual) and leave behind something else, the environment (the possible). It is evident from the empirical analysis that teachers and students do not have the same purpose in making meaning – what teachers find as meaningful (career) learning is not necessarily meaningful for the students and vice versa. There are different processes of meaning-making concerning questions about; what is relevant content in upper secondary school (fact dimension)? When is career learning relevant (temporal dimension)? And to whom is career learning relevant (social dimension)?

Communication: Just like meaning-making, the (sub) system's internal and -external communication about the construction of career learning as an educational concept is evident in the empirical data when analysing it through the system's theoretical framework. Most teachers rejected communication about career learning as an educational concept. However, it was the communication from the political system that they rejected. Thus, the teachers rejected the politically initiated communication about career learning and the word 'career', as they saw it as potentially harmful to their students and their practice. In their communication, the teachers highlighted Bildung as the primary purpose of education and described career learning (through the semantic position of "choice") as the opposite of Bildung. For the teachers, Bildung was about becoming a cultivated, reflective being and citizen, while career learning was about choice, competitiveness and (to a certain degree) neo-liberalism. However, there were some cases where the teachers accepted career learning as an educational concept. In these cases, career learning was equated with Bildung. Thus, career learning became about helping students to become, as one teacher (provincial school) argued "*whole human beings* [who] *have a broad knowledge of who they are, their society and the world and* [based on that] *can make more reflective choices concerning themselves and everything around them*". Nevertheless, because Bildung is a recognised cornerstone in the Danish educational system, this comparison almost made career learning irrelevant to those teachers.

In contrast with their teachers, the students accepted the political communication about career learning and rejected (or were simply unaware) of their teachers' construction. Being 'in the moment', they knew they needed to choose something and accepted that career learning as an educational subject could help them make these choices. This would happen, not through force, but through knowledge and awareness about who they were, what they could be, and knowledge about education, the labour market and society. Overall, the students saw career learning as an invitation to become agents in their own lives – owning their present and future and therefore a positive focus.

The education systems function and code: The teachers' rejection of career learning was, to a certain degree, related to their understanding of the function and codes of the education system. Referring back to the theoretical framework the education system has the primary function 'Education', the secondary function 'Career selection' and the code 'better ⅂ worse'. Therefore, the teachers reject career learning with reference to the education system's primary function (Education) while ignoring or dissociating the secondary function (career selection). This supports Luhmann, who writes that pedagogy (i.e. the organisations within the education system) *"has loved education as its real function and rejected career selection as a mandate imposed by the state."* (Luhmann, 2006, p. 89. Authors translation). Furthermore, the theoretical framework shines a light on what teachers see as good and bad education and content (the education systems code 'better ⅂ worse'). For the teachers, the semantic 'choice'

DOI: 10.16993/njtcg.50

represents something negative and irrelevant, while the semantic 'learning', to a much greater extent, represents something positive and relevant. Thus, career learning constructed through the semantic 'learning' becomes the 'better part' of the education systems code, while career learning constructed through the semantic 'choice' becomes the 'worse' part of the code.

How can upper secondary schools move on from here? Can career learning become a meaningful, integrated part of the upper secondary curriculum? The answer to this calls for further investigation. However, the findings in this study indicate that the teachers' rejection and lack of knowledge on how to understand, construct and potentially integrate (meaningful) career learning as an educational concept should be addressed to make it meaningful in practice. One way could be to address the knowledge gap between teachers' understanding of career learning as an educational concept and modern career- and guidance theory. This could be addressed through co-teaching across disciplines or co-creating an inter-professional collaboration. In many ways, with the Danish educational reform (where career learning was formulated as something teachers should integrate), teachers were being asked to integrate professional knowledge from another profession. While teachers in upper secondary school know a lot about didactics, teaching and their subject, they do not necessarily know much about guidance, transitions and counselling. There are career professionals who do. By co-creating concepts and different didactical formats for career learning – while sharing knowledge and learning about careers – teachers may be able to integrate career learning into their curriculum when it is meaningful for their students and their practice. One way to ensure this co-creation could be by working explicitly with the dichotomies addressed in this paper – bringing together the career professionals' knowledge of careers and guidance and the teachers' knowledge of their subject and didactics.

CONCLUSION

This study used six semantic positions from the career- and guidance theory to demonstrate how career learning was constructed as a meaningful educational concept by both teachers and students. The semantic positions were developed using a systems theoretical semantic analysis and used to illuminate different positions in this construction.

The findings in this study indicate that integrating career learning as a meaningful educational concept is a task filled with paradoxes. On the one hand, teachers see career learning as harmful and want to help their students by rejecting it as an educational concept. In contrast, students, accepted career learning as helpful to them as individuals. The paradox is emphasised by the teachers and students drawing on the same semantic positions in their respective rejection and acceptance.

Employing a systems theoretical framework on concepts such as systems, communication, and meaning made it possible to describe how and why career learning is understood and constructed in multiple ways. The data clearly show no direct communication and meaning from the political level to the teachers' planned practice and the students' experienced practice. Instead, each system (political, education, teachers, and students) operates and understands according to their self-reference and autopoiesis. That is, even though the different actors essentially want the same: to give students the best possible conditions for their future lives.

The findings also indicate that the lack of a specific curriculum and scheduled hours when integrating career learning makes it hard to integrate career learning into the subjects, in a meaningful way for teachers, students and the subject itself. It is important to emphasise that having a fixed curriculum and scheduled hours do not always make the integration of career education and career learning unproblematic (e.g. Skovhus, 2018; Røise, 2020). However, nor does a lack of curriculum and scheduled hours in Danish upper secondary schools, as this study has illuminated.

In conclusion, this study provides a preliminary understanding of the potential paradoxes when integrating career learning into the upper secondary curriculum when teachers with no prior knowledge of career learning are in charge of this integration. In addition, the study provides a theoretical framework for further investigation, drawing on a semantic analysis and systems theory.

This study has some limitations. The way in which the study was designed recognised that career learning was a relatively new educational concept in the specific context and a concept that most schools and teachers still struggled with (The Danish Evaluation Institute & Rambøll 2019). The teachers invited to participate in the study were not required to know precisely how they should, would or could integrate career learning into their subjects. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that this study draws on a limited scale-study and that data was collected in the first years after introducing career learning as an educational concept in upper secondary school. The ten teachers' or thirteen students understanding of career learning might not be representative of other students, teachers, school forms or levels.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION


Laura Felby orcid.org/0000-0003-2183-2431
Aarhus University, DK

REFERENCES

Act on Upper Secondary School. (2021). Bekendtgørelse af lov om de gymnasiale uddannelser, LBK nr 1375 af 24/06/2021 [Act on Upper Secondary School]. https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2021/1375

Amundson, N. E., & **Thrift, E.** (2008). The emergence of more dynamic counselling methods. In J. A. Athanasou & R. Van Esbroeck (Eds.), *International Handbook of Career Guidance* (pp. 325–340). Springer. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6230-8_6

Andersen, N. Å. (2003). *Discursive analytical strategies: Understanding Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau, Luhmann*. The Policy Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t898nd

Andersen, N. Å. (2011). Conceptual history and the diagnostics of the present. *Management & Organizational History*, *6*(3), 248–267. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1744935911406152

Andrews, D. (2011). *Careers education in schools: The history of the development of careers education in schools and a critical examination of policy, practice and possibilities for its future*. HighFlyers.

Bright, J. E. H., & **Pryor, R. G. L.** (2005). The chaos theory of careers: A user's guide. *The Career Development Quarterly*, *53*(4), 291–305. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2005.tb00660.x

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press.

The Careers and Enterprise Company. (2022). *Gatsby Benchmark 4 | CEC Resource Directory*. https://resources.careersandenterprise.co.uk/browse-category/gatsby-benchmarks/gatsby-benchmark-4

The Danish Evaluation Institute, EVA, & Rambøll. (2019). *Følgeforskningsprogrammet til gymnasiereformen—Fjerde delrapport* [The follow-up research program for the upper secondary school reform—Fourth interim report]. The Danish Evaluation Institute, EVA. https://www.eva.dk/ungdomsuddannelse/gymnasiereformen-foelgeforskningsprogram-4-delrapport

Dodd, V., & **Hooley, T.** (2018). The development of the Teachers' Attitudes toward Career Learning Index (TACLI). *Teacher Development*, *22*(1), 139–150. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2017.1385518

Gati, I., & **Tal, S.** (2008). Decision-making models and career guidance. In J. A. Athanasou & R. Van Esbroeck (Eds.), *International Handbook of Career Guidance* (pp. 157–185). Springer. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6230-8_8

Gelatt, H. B. (1989). Positive uncertainty: A new decision-making framework for counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *36*(2), 252–256. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.36.2.252

Gottfredson, L. S. (2002). Gottfredson's theory of circumscription, compromise, and self-creation. In D. Brown (Ed.), *Career Choice and Development* (pp. 85–148). Jossey-Bass.

Gymnasieskolerne lærerforening. (2020). *Ansøgertal 2020—Med fokus på de gymnasiale uddannelser* [Number of applicants 2020—Focusing on upper secondary education]. GL. https://www.gl.org/nyt/Documents/S%C3%B8getal%202020%20til%20de%20gymnasiale%20uddannelser.pdf

Haug, E. H., Hooley, T., Kettunen, J., & **Thomsen, R.** (2020). *Career and career guidance in the Nordic countries*. Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004428096

Haug, E. H., Plant, P., Valdimarsdóttir, S., Bergmo-Prvulovic, I., Vuorinen, R., Lovén, A., & **Vilhjálmsdóttir, G.** (2019). Nordic research on educational and vocational guidance: A systematic literature review of thematic features between 2003 and 2016. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, *19*(2), 185–202. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-018-9375-4

Højdal, L. (2020). Contemporary approaches to career counseling: Critical perspectives on the life-design paradigm. *Nordic Journal of Transitions, Careers and Guidance*, *1*(1), 27–37. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16993/njtcg.24

Holland, J. L. (1997). *Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments* (3rd ed). Psychological Assessment Resources.

Hooley, T. (2015). *Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery: Self-actualisation, social justice and the politics of career guidance*. International Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby. https://derby.openrepository.com/handle/10545/579895

Hooley, T., Sultana, R. G., & **Thomsen, R.** (Eds.) (2018). *Career guidance for social justice: Contesting neoliberalism*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315110486

Hooley, T., Sultana, R. G., & **Thomsen, R.** (2019). *Career guidance for emancipation: Reclaiming justice for the multitude*. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315110486

Irving, B. A. (2018*). Nytt innhold til karrierebegreper?* [*Challenging career(s) in changing times: Shifting perspectives*.] Veilederforum.no. https://veilederforum.no/artikler/teori/nytt-innhold-til-karrierebegrepet

Killeen, J. (1996). Career theory. In A. G. Watts (Ed.), *Rethinking careers education and guidance: Theory, policy, and practice* (pp. 15–28). Routledge.

la Cour, A., Knudsen, M., & **Thygesen, N. T.** (2005). *Det systemteoretiske interview: Interviewet som meningsdannelse* [The system-theoretic interview: The interview as meaning-formation]. MPP working paper Nr. 8/2005. Department of management, politics and philosophy, Copenhagen Business school.

Law, B. (2017). Learning for living: The point of narrative. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, *45*(4), 369–375. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2017.1343459

Leung, S. A. (2008). The big five career theories. In J. A. Athanasou & R. Van Esbroeck (Eds.), *International Handbook of Career Guidance* (pp. 115–132). Springer Netherlands. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6230-8_6

Luhmann, N. (1985). Complexity and meaning. In Prigogine, Zeleny, & Morin (Eds.), *The Science and Praxis of Complexity* (pp. 99-106). The United Nations University.

Luhmann, N. (1995). *Social systems*. Stanford University Press.

Luhmann, N. (2006). *Samfundets uddannelsessystem* [Education as a social system](1st ed.). Hans Reitzel.

Luhmann, N., & **Schorr, K.-E.** (2000). *Problems of reflection in the system of education*. Waxmann.

Ministry of Children and Education. (2016). *Aftaletekst —Styrkede gymnasiale Uddannelser*. [Agreement text—Strengthened upper secondary education]. Ministry of Education. https://dpt.dk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/160603-Styrkede-gymnasiale-uddannelser.pdf

Ministry of Children and Education. (2020). *The Higher General Examination Programme (stx)*. https://eng.uvm.dk/upper-secondary-education/national-upper-secondary-education-programmes/the-higher-general-examination-programme--stx-

Mitchell, K. E., Al Levin, S., & **Krumboltz, J. D.** (1999). Planned happenstance: Constructing unexpected career opportunities. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *77*(2), 115–124. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1999.tb02431.x

Plant, P. (2020). Paradigms under pressure: Green guidance. *Nordic Journal of Transitions, Careers and Guidance*, *1*(1), 1–9. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16993/njtcg.25

Poulsen, B. K. (2020). Insights and outlooks: Career learning in the final years of compulsory school. *Education Inquiry*, *11*(4), 316–330. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2020.1713691

Poulsen, B. K., & **Buland, T.** (2020). Come together: Professional development of career guidance practitioners through co-generative learning. In E. H. Haug, T. Hooley, J. Kettunen, & R. Thomsen (Eds.), *Career and Career Guidance in the Nordic Countries* (pp. 219–234). Brill. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004428096_015

Prvulovic, I. B. (2020). Playing the career game in a changing world of work: Career navigation and support strategies in advice columns. *Nordic Journal of Transitions, Careers and Guidance*, *1*(1), 53–68. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16993/njtcg.31

Røise, P. (2020). If career education is the solution, what is the implied problem?: A critical analysis of the timetabled subject of educational choice in Norwegian schools. In E. H. Haug, T. Hooley, J. Kettunen, & R. Thomsen (Eds.), *Career and Career Guidance in the Nordic Countries* (pp. 265–280). BRILL. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004428096_018

Savickas, M. L. (2002). Career construction—A developmental theory of vocational behavior. In D. Brown (Ed.), *Career choice and development* (4th ed, pp. 149–205). Jossey-Bass.

Savickas, M. L., & **Porfeli, E. J.** (2012). Career Adapt-Abilities Scale: Construction, reliability, and measurement equivalence across 13 countries. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *80*(3), 661–673. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2012.01.011

Siljander, P., Kivelä, A., & **Sutinen, A.** (2012). *Theories of bildung and growth*. SensePublishers. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-031-6

Skovhus, R. B. (2018). *Vejledning—Valg og læring* [Guidance – choice and learning]. Trykværket.

Skovhus, R. B., & **Felby, L. C.** (2020). Gymnasielæreres forståelse af karrierelæring – en Koselleck inspireret begrebshistorisk analyse [Upper secondary school teachers' understanding of career learning – an analysis inspired by Kosellecks conceptual history]. *Nordisk Tidsskrift i Veiledningspedagogikk*, *5*(1), e2890. DOI: https://doi.org/10.15845/ntvp.v5i1.2890

Sohn, Y. (2021). Four pillars of Luhmann's analytical apparatus: Applications for communication research. *Studies in Communication Sciences*. DOI: https://doi.org/10.24434/j.scoms.2021.02.002

Stichweh, R. (2011). Systems Theory. In B. Badie, D. Berg-Schlosser, & L. Morlino (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of Political Science* (Vol. 2011). Sage Publication. https://www.academia.edu/8688520/Systems_Theory_International_Encyclopedia_of_Political_Science_2011

Super, D. E. (1980). A life-span, life-space approach to career development. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *16*(3), 282–298. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(80)90056-1

Thomsen, R. (2014). *A Nordic perspective on career competences and guidance – Career choices and career learning*. [A concept note on career competences prepared for NVL & ELGPN]. Nordiskt nätverk för vuxnas lärande.

Watts, T., Hooley, T., & **Barham, L.** (2015). *Career development: Policy and practice, the Tony Watts reader*. Highflyers.

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Felby, L. (2022). Helpful or Harmful? The Integration of Career Learning in the Danish Upper Secondary Curriculum. *Nordic Journal of Transitions, Careers and Guidance*, 3(1), pp. 16–29. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16993/njtcg.50

Submitted: 16 March 2022
Accepted: 10 October 2022
Published: 08 November 2022

Nordic Journal of Transitions, Careers and Guidance is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Stockholm University Press.