



A Cross-National Analysis of the (Re)actualization of Work Experience Placement as a Career Education Activity in Sweden and Denmark



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ABSTRACT

This article explores policy arguments for the re-actualization of work experience placement (WEP) as a career education and guidance (CEG) activity in Sweden and Denmark through analysis of problematizations and assumptions that underpin its re-actualization as a CEG activity in the two countries. The exploration focuses on core policy documents that widened the right to WEP in Denmark in 2017/18 and reintroduced mandatory WEP in Sweden in 2018. The results show that WEP was actualized by a problematization of the decline in applications for upper secondary vocational education (VET) and accompanying concerns regarding the supply of competences needed by the labour market. The decline was assumed to be due to young people's lack of interest in VET. This, in turn, was attributed to their lack of knowledge and contact with the world of work and insufficient preparation in compulsory schools to enable them to make informed educational and vocational choices. The ability of the policies that address WEP to reach the goal of increasing young people's interest in VET is questioned and social justice concerns are raised. It is argued that isolated WEP events do not necessarily increase young people's interest in, or knowledge of, VET. Instead, WEP must be embedded in a systematic and coherent CEG program that can support expansion of the space of valued occupational options.

ABSTRAKT

Denne artikel undersøger policyargumenter for re-aktualisering af erhverspraktik (WEP) som en karrierelæringsaktivitet i Sverige og Danmark gennem en analyse af hvilke problematiseringer der ligger til grund for denne re-aktualisering af erhverspraktik som karrierelæringsaktivitet. Udforskningen fokuserer på de policydokumenter, der udvidede retten til erhverspraktik i Danmark i 2017/18 og genindførte obligatorisk praktik i Sverige i 2018. Resultaterne viser, at erhverspraktik blev aktualiseret ved en problematisering af nedgangen i ansøgninger til de gymnasiale erhversuddannelser (EUD), og medfølgende bekymringer vedrørende udbuddet af kompetencer, som arbejdsmarkedet har brug for. Nedgangen blev antaget at skyldes unges manglende interesse for EUD. Dette forklares med unges manglende viden og kontakt til arbejdslivet og utilstrækkelige forberedelser i grundskolerne i at understøtte dem i at træffe informerede uddannelses- og erhvervsvalg. Artiklen sættes spørgsmålstegn ved WEP-politikernes evne til at nå målet om at øge unges interesse for EUD og mulige udfordringer i relation til social retfærdighed rejses. Det hævdes, at erhverspraktik alene ikke nødvendigvis øger unges interesse for eller viden om EUD. I stedet skal WEP placeres i et systematisk og sammenhængende karrierelæringsprogram som kan understøtte en udvidelse af hvilke erhverv som anses for værdifulde.

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In recent years there has been growing interest in young peoples' knowledge and experience of the world of work and lower secondary education as an arena for helping them to gain experience of it (Kettunen et al., 2023; Mann et al., 2020). During 2021 the OECD Career Readiness project launched a series of publications, based on reviews of existing studies of national longitudinal datasets and new analysis of PISA data (OECD, 2021), concluding that schools in most countries could do much more to help young people navigate their school-to-work transitions.

In present article work experience placement (WEP) refers to an activity within career education and guidance (CEG) in compulsory education (Einarsdottir et al., 2023; Kettunen et al., 2023; Rosvall & Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, 2023; Skovhus & Poulsen, 2021; Thomsen et al., 2024). In this study, CEG refers to general activities in compulsory school that systematically attempt to support students' career development as distinct from career guidance that refers to one-to-one guidance provided to a student by a counsellor (e.g. Rosvall & Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, 2023). CEG is intended to enable pupils "to construct an adequate representative framework for coping with the school and vocational – but also personal – transitions they encounter" (Guichard, 2001). According to Guichard (2001) what young people are supposed to learn in CEG is "to understand the links that can be established between individuals and occupations, to discover the function and organization of companies, to create decision-making strategies that are felt to be rational." (Guichard, 2001 p.157). WEP during compulsory education is a means of contributing to such learning by providing practical insights through young people's participation in various work-related activities at a workplace for a period of time without the supervision of a teacher (e.g. Huddleston, 2000; Huddleston & Oh, 2004; Kettunen et al., 2023).

Young people's experiences of working life have recognized importance for their management of the transition into the labour market as adults (Hughes et al., 2016; Lundahl et al., 2020; Mann et al., 2020; Millard et al., 2019). However, it has been argued that changes in the labour market including, among other shifts, reductions in needs for unskilled labour and the availability of part-time jobs, have reduced young people's contact with working life (Hughes et al., 2016). Moreover, increases in the time young people go to school have complicated efforts to integrate such contact in study schedules, and they are faced with increasing study and education options (Ahier et al., 2000; Herrström & Malm Lindberg, 2016; OECD, 2021). Based on these observations, increasing needs have been identified for schools to organize opportunities for young people to become familiar with the world of work (Hughes et al., 2016) in order to develop employability skills (Messer, 2018) and career readiness (Mann et al., 2020).

A widely expressed conclusion in the existing research on WEP is that obtaining personal experiences of the world of work can help to increase self-awareness, expand knowledge of the outside world, and broaden perspectives, thus having the capacity to provide robust foundations for young people to choose directions for future employment (Buzzeo & Cifci, 2017; Herrström & Malm Lindberg, 2016; Hirasawa & Sundelin, 2003; Lundahl et al., 2020; Millard et al., 2019; SNAE, 2005, 2008; Skovhus & Poulsen, 2021). WEP can contribute to employability and development of the technical skills required in work (Buzzeo & Cifci, 2017; Mann, 2012; Messer, 2018; Stanley & Mann, 2014). However, the organization of WEP also influences young people's opportunities to participate and the nature of their learning, especially in terms of social justice (Ahier et al., 2000; Bimrose et al., 2014; Hedenus & Wikstrand, 2015; Hooley et al., 2015; Skovhus & Poulsen, 2021). Hedenus & Wikstrand (2015) have shown that young people's interest in potential occupations strongly influences their motivation for participation and learning. However, interests are also strongly influenced by social structures (Gottfredson, 2005), and many young people do not take the initiative themselves to seek information about professions that they are not already interested in (Hedenus & Wikstrand, 2015). Thus, heavy reliance on interests and free choice in the allocation of WEP, in the belief that it will bolster young people's motivation to participate in WEP, can result in social, gender and ethnic differentiation in young people's participation and learning (Francis et al., 2005; Hatcher & Le Gallais, 2008; Osgood et al., 2006). In addition, students' opportunities to gain experience of working life are limited by companies' desires or opportunities to provide placements (Bimrose et al., 2014). Evidence that such social factors influence the places and occupations offered to Swedish students (and thus that WEP seems to conserve social structures) has also been

presented (Hirasawa & Sundelin, 2003). Similarly, Osgood et al. (2006) found that although WEP can potentially play an important role in providing young people with broader, diverse and/or non-traditional experiences and ideas about working life in England, securing WEP with local employers favours some students over others. Hence, it can be a significant barrier to social justice and equality of opportunity. In relation to social justice, understood as the expansion of valued options, Skovhus & Poulsen (2021) argue that it is not enough for young people to know about different vocations, the framing of WEP as a learning process promoting curiosity and reflection is necessary to contribute to widening of students' educational and professional horizons.

During 2017 and 2018 changes were made to the school laws regarding WEP in compulsory education in Sweden and Denmark. In Sweden, a minimum of 10 days of mandatory WEP (Praktisk arbetslivsorientering/prao) from grade 8 was reintroduced in 2018, 24 years after its abolition as a mandatory requirement in 1994 (Prop. 2017/18:24). In 2017 access to WEP (erhvervspraktik) in Danish lower secondary education was widened from 8th—9th grade to 6th—9th grade, and in 2018 the right to at least one week of WEP in both 8th and 9th grades was enshrined in the Danish Education Act (BUVM, 2022a). The simultaneity of these changes in WEP legislation in the two Nordic countries prompted the curiosity to explore the ways in which WEP has come to matter as a CEG activity in lower secondary education in Sweden and Denmark. Accordingly, this article asks: what problematizations and assumptions are underpinning WEP's re-actualization as a CEG activity in the two countries? The question is answered by analysing the policy documents that reintroduced mandatory WEP in Swedish curricula and widened the access and right to WEP in Danish curricula.

CAREER EDUCATION AND WEP IN DENMARK AND SWEDEN

Both Sweden and Denmark have a tradition of experience-based CEG activities (Rosvall & Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, 2023; Skovhus & Thomsen, 2020; Thomsen et al., 2024). However, while there are some similarities regarding the national guidelines, curricula and general aims of CEG and WEP between Sweden and Denmark, there are also significant differences (Einarsdottir et al., 2023; Kettunen et al., 2023) as shown below.

SWEDEN

In Sweden a whole school approach (Rosvall & Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, 2023) is applied, meaning that all school staff share responsibility for CEG, and compulsory schools are responsible for supporting young people's ability to make choices regarding further education and vocational orientation (Lgr22). The National Agency for Education (SNAE, 2013) identifies three forms of intervention: teaching and information provision (by counsellors and teachers) and career interviews provided by career counsellors (Kettunen et al., 2023). Swedish legislation states that students should have access to a qualified career guidance counsellor but does not stipulate the extent of associated teaching or number of lessons (Einarsdottir et al., 2023; Kettunen et al., 2023; Rosvall & Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, 2023). It is the responsibility of teachers to "support individual pupils when making choices regarding their further education and to assist in establishing contacts with schools that will be receiving the pupils, as well as with organisations, companies and others who can help to enrich the school's activities and to establish it in the surrounding society" (Lgr22:17). Career guidance counsellors or staff members with an equivalent role should "inform and guide pupils prior to the next stage of their education and vocational orientation, focusing particularly on opportunities for pupils with functional impairments, and assisting the study and vocational guidance efforts of other members of staff" (Lgr22).

Due to the deregulation of schools in 1991, which shifted responsibility for compulsory education from the state to municipality level, the content of CEG is not described in detail in either legislation or the curriculum, leaving it to the municipalities and schools to decide how to provide CEG activities (Kettunen et al., 2023; Rosvall & Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, 2023). In 2018 a change to the school act reinstated a requirement for schools to provide WEP as a CEG activity, following its abolishment in 1994 (SFS, 2010:800). However, although WEP was not mandatory during the period 1994–2018 it is estimated that 80–90% of schools offered it (Prop. 2017/18:24). In all Swedish curricula between 1955 and its abolition in 1994 (Lgr62; Lgr69;

Lgr80; Lpo94; U-55) WEP was described as a CEG activity that can give the young people a real view of working life. The curricula claimed that this broadens their perspective of themselves and various professions and contributes to young people making realistic and well-founded educational choices. These curricula also described WEP as a tool that could contribute to the solution of some societal challenges, such as a gender-divided labour market, issues related to social inheritance, and dropouts.

DENMARK

In Denmark, CEG in compulsory school is provided on the basis of the topic of 'Education and Work' ('Uddannelse og job') (BUVM, 2022a; Einarsdottir et al., 2023; Kettunen et al., 2023; Thomsen et al., 2024). CEG is intended to enable young people to make informed education and vocational choices by enhancing their awareness of their abilities, interests and possibilities (BUVM, 2022b). 'Education and Work' is a compulsory topic that teachers are to integrate into all compulsory school subjects at every grade, but the extent of teaching is not regulated and there is no specified individual timetable (Einarsdottir et al., 2023; Kettunen et al., 2023; Thomsen et al., 2024). A new curriculum for teacher education (Regeringen, 2022) implemented by 2023 includes an elective subject on Education and Work, but generally there are no specific demands regarding the qualifications of 'Education and Work' teachers (Kettunen et al., 2023; Thomsen et al., 2024). Activities within 'Education and Work' are to be planned in cooperation with full-time career counsellors with legally defined qualifications employed in municipal youth guidance units ('Den kommunale ungeindsats') (Einarsdottir et al., 2023; Thomsen et al., 2024; BUVM, 2022a, §7). The career guidance provided by these units is to build on the knowledge and skills that students acquire in 'Education and Work', to help them make informed and qualified choices to facilitate transition from compulsory lower secondary education to upper secondary education (vocational or general) or full-time work (BUVM, 2022b).

In the Danish legislation and curriculum, the CEG content are described in more detail, and specific activities are mentioned (Thomsen et al., 2024). In cooperation with municipal youth guidance units, lower secondary schools (grades 7–10) must provide collective, group and individual career guidance, including introduction to the vocational and academic upper secondary programs, the application program for enrolment in upper secondary education, the national digital guidance portal (ug.dk) and the digital career guidance service (eGuidance) (Thomsen et al., 2024). It is also expected to provide information meetings for pupils and their parents, as well as introductory and taster courses for upper secondary programs (mandatory in grade 8 and 10) (Thomsen et al., 2024). In 2017 and 2018 changes were made regarding the access and right to WEP, although the schools were not required to organize WEP (BUVM, 2022a).

METHOD

The theoretical framework and methodology applied in this study are inspired by the 'What is the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). With Foucauldian post-structuralist roots, this approach regards policy as discourse, understood as "the ways in which policy ensembles, or collections of related policies, exercise power through a *production* of 'truth' and 'knowledge'" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Policy discourses are practices that have effects in terms of constituting subjects and subjectivities, impose limitations on what can be said and thought as well as having material effects on people's lives (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Thus, policy is not seen as a way of (rational) problem-solving, but as a problematization that produces 'problems' (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

The methodological approach (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) suggests the following set of questions for critical scrutiny of policy.

- Q1. What is the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
- Q2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the 'problem'?
- Q3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?

Q4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?

Q5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?

Q6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated, and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted, and replaced?

These questions inspired the selection and analysis of the empirical material addressed in this study, which consists of series of policy documents, including government reports, government bills, and statements regarding political agreements, as described below. The analysis (cf. Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) initially focused on the problem representation (Q1) and assumptions (Q2) found in the Swedish government bill on WEP (Prop. 2017/18:24) and the Danish political agreement which included WEP (Regeringen, 2018). To answer Q3 related policy documents that were directly mentioned in the core policy documents were also identified, together with others concerning key concepts mentioned in the core documents, such as 'praksisfaglighed' (practical expertise), 'kompetensforsörjning' (competence supply). The related Swedish policy documents (Dir. 2013:122; Dir. 2014:50; Dir. 2015:15; Dir. 2015:84; Dir. 2017:116; Prop. 2017/18:24; SOU 2015:97; SOU 2019:4) and Danish (Regeringen, 2013, 2017, 2018) were then analysed in relation to Q1–6 and the core problematizations and discourses in the documents were summarized. The identified Swedish and Danish documents were all published in the period from 2013 to 2019.

FINDINGS

The analysis shows that in both Sweden and Denmark WEP was re-actualized foremost by a problematization of the decline in application for upper secondary vocational education (VET), and associated concerns for the supply of competences needed by the labor market. Several reasons for reintroducing or strengthening WEP were identified in the documents. These included beliefs that too many young people were changing upper secondary programs due to weak anchoring in working life (partly ascribed to lack of WEP) and weak matches between educational choices and real professional establishment (partly ascribed to insufficient access to WEP). However, the decline in numbers of applicants for VET programmes was the most frequently expressed reason. Thus, this article focuses on the connections made between this decline and the reintroduction/strengthening of WEP.

While the two countries have shared problem representations and assumptions, they have differed in terms of the degree of reforms and level of detail in proposed aims and content of WEP and CEG. As shown below, in Denmark there have been several reforms of CEG in compulsory school, while CEG in Sweden has remained untouched since 1994 until 2018. Furthermore, since the 1994 deregulation of the Swedish curricula, Swedish policy has only provided general framework descriptions (Rosvall & Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, 2023), while in Denmark there have been much more specific descriptions of what CEG in schools must include (Thomsen et al., 2024).

POLICY DEVELOPMENT FOR WEP IN SWEDEN

In Sweden a special investigator was appointed by the government in December 2013 to submit proposals for supplementing the upper secondary vocational technology programme (TP) with one or more industrial technical orientations with clear career outcomes (Dir. 2013:122). The aim was to create attractive technical training (Dir. 2013:122). In the directive the decline of applications for TP is problematized in relation to the importance of manufacturing industry for Swedish society, the necessity of access to good technical competence for Swedish industry's global competitiveness, and the lack of interest in TP among young people. Thus, it is termed a mismatch problem. The inquiry was extended in 2014 (Dir. 2014:50), and again twice in 2015 (Dir. 2015:15; Dir. 2015:84). During the process it was renamed 'The Vocational Program Inquiry' and tasked with submitting proposals for strengthening the quality and attractiveness of all of VET, facilitating young people's transition from school to working life and strengthening the national competence supply (Dir. 2014:50; Dir. 2015:84).

In 2017 the Inquiry submitted a proposal entitled ‘Choosing vocation’ (Välja yrke) (SOU 2015:97) for solving the problem of young people’s lack of interest in VET and the school’s insufficiency in preparing them to make “well founded” educational choices” (SOU 2015:97 p.55). The proposal strongly emphasizes a need to improve CEG in compulsory school, and particularly WEP as a tool for supporting more “conscious career choices” (SOU 2015:97 p. 55). Thus, it recommends mandatory WEP and an investigation of ways to improve CEG. In the documents there is no mentioning of the major reform of upper secondary education implemented in 2011 (Gy11) which was intended to enhance vocational students’ preparation for working life. According to Statistics Sweden the reform can be related to a major decline in applications for VET programmes. During 2011–2016 on average 38 percent of students applied for a vocational program, compared to 53 percent in 2005–2010 (Statistics Sweden, 2017).

In October 2017 the Swedish Government presented a proposal entitled “Strengthened connection between school and working life” (Stärkt koppling mellan skola och arbetsliv) (Prop. 2017/18:24) that recommends mandatory WEP. Subsequently in November 2017 a special investigator was appointed to submit proposals to develop schools’ CEG programs to provide all students “equal opportunities to make well-considered choices based on good knowledge of educational paths and working life” (Dir. 2017:116, authors translation). In January 2019 the special investigator submitted a proposal, “Future choice – career guidance for the individual and society” (Framtidsval – karriärvägledning för individ och samhälle) (SOU 2019:4), entailing a comprehensive reform of CEG in the Swedish educational and vocational system. Due to the inability to reach a political agreement in the Swedish parliament, the reform was never implemented.

While the investigation was ongoing, the Swedish parliament agreed to re-introduce mandatory WEP in 2018. It should be noted that although it had not been mandatory for 24 years, some form of WEP had been organized for pupils to experience the world of work. However, these activities are described as independent elements that were rarely used in the school’s teaching (SOU 2002:120; SOU 2019:4) and a great need for development had been recognized (Lundahl et al., 2020; SOU 2015:97). Making WEP mandatory was regarded as a way of securing the school’s responsibility to deliver more sufficient WEP. This sufficiency is described in terms of the school’s responsibility to provide equal access to placements for all pupils to prevent students’ career choices being limited by gender, social or cultural background (Prop. 2017/18:24). WEP of a minimum duration of 10 days was believed to be essential for young people to have a real opportunity to experience and obtain knowledge of the world of work. It was also argued that since many schools and municipalities already provided WEP, mandatory WEP would have minor economic impacts (Prop. 2017/18:24).

POLICY DEVELOPMENT FOR WEP IN DENMARK

In Denmark a drop in applications for VET programmes directly after compulsory education from 30% of the cohort in 2000 to 19% of the cohort in 2013, and a dropout rate of almost 50% from VET programmes, were problematized (Regeringen, 2013), even though the number also includes students who changed to other programs, mostly connected to the inability to obtain the apprenticeships required to complete VET (see also Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019). In addition, a comprehensive reform of VET entitled “Skilled workers for the future – Better and more attractive upper secondary vocational education” (Faglært til fremtiden – bedre og mere attraktive erhvervsuddannelser) was initiated in October 2013 by the Social Democratic-led government (Regeringen, 2013). The argument for the reform was formulated as a need for skilled workers, described as “people who can use both head and hands”, and “talented” young people who can “think creatively and practically” as requirements for creating “new jobs within production, construction, and service industries” (Regeringen, 2013, p. 7). To achieve the goals a need for more young people to choose VET directly after compulsory education was assumed, and the lack of interest among young people was ascribed to the lack of focus on VET over the years, resulting in an apparent lack of sufficient attractiveness.

The reform thus supplements a target of at least 95% of cohorts completing upper secondary education that was set by the Danish Parliament in 2006 with the following VET-related goals: at least 25% choosing VET directly after compulsory school in 2020, rising to 30% in 2025, with at least 50% and 67% of those choosing VET completing their education in 2020 and 2025, respectively (Regeringen, 2013). The reform also entailed a comprehensive reform of

the Danish career guidance system, including cuts in funds to finance the VET-reform (Jensen, 2020). Provisions under the heading 'Focusing guidance activities' markedly reduced the access to individual career guidance through a shift in timing of 'the educational readiness assessment' (uddannelsesparathedsvurdering) that was introduced in 2010 (BUVM, 2010) from 9th to 8th grade (Regeringen, 2013). This change aimed at identifying young people who needed additional and tailored guidance earlier. It was assumed that 20% of young people in compulsory education would be assessed as 'not ready' and thus in need of individual career guidance. The remaining 80% would only be entitled to collective CEG and digital career guidance (Regeringen, 2013). The reform thus introduced digital career guidance, and a unit of digital career guidance counsellors (eVejledning) was established under the Ministry of Education.

In 2017 an agreement was reached between the liberal-conservative government and the Danish People's Party to change the Law on Career Guidance (Vejledningsloven) by introducing "a practical expertise dimension in the educational readiness assessment" (praksisfaglig dimension i uddannelsesparathedsvurderingen) (Regeringen, 2017). This was regarded as a means to clarify the young peoples' practical competences and increase awareness of their importance (without significant additional costs), thus raising the attractiveness of VET for some students "who have only set eyes on" the academic tracks of upper secondary education (Regeringen, 2017, p. 1).

In 2018 students' practical expertise was also the focus of an agreement between the liberal-conservative government, Social Democratic Party, Danish People's Party, Danish Social Liberal Party, and Green Left on what is called strengthened practical expertise (Styrket praksisfaglighed) (Regeringen, 2018). The practical expertise covered not only the ability "to use a hammer and angle grinder" but also entrepreneurship skills, including "inventiveness" and "creativity" and the "ability to translate methods and theories into concrete products" (Regeringen, 2018, p.1). Practical expertise is thought of as a way of promoting "several different aspects of the individual student's versatile development and Bildung" (Regeringen, 2018, p.1), which compulsory school did not do sufficiently as they were too academic. The problematization of young people's lack of interest is particularly described as a lack of interest in natural science and technology (regarded as the school subjects that the labour market had the highest competence needs) (Regeringen, 2018, p.1).

Another identified factor was lack of awareness of the career possibilities connected to VET. It was assumed that enhancement of more practical aspects in the schools' teaching would "naturally" lead to more young people becoming "aware" of VET as a career path and increase their interest in natural science and technology (Regeringen, 2018, p.1). The school's insufficiency was described in terms of being too academic and not practical enough, as "the application-oriented, practical and business-oriented elements in the teaching were not good enough" (Regeringen, 2018, p.1). This insufficiency was partly attributed to insufficient cooperation between compulsory education and VET schools. Thus, the reform introduced a two-year mandatory practical/music elective subject in grades 7 and 8, strengthened practical elements of the mandatory project assignment in grade 9, provided the right to at least one week of WEP for all pupils in grades 8 and 9, and initiated a project to support the development and implementation of practical expertise in the school subjects (Regeringen, 2018, p.2).

The provision of a right to WEP for all pupils was based on the assumption that the schools and school boards did not support pupils who wanted to participate in WEP (Regeringen, 2018, p. 4). However, obtaining a WEP placement remained the responsibility of the young people (and their parents). According to the Danish Evaluation Institute WEP was used to varying extents in Danish compulsory schools. In a report from 2015 18% of surveyed teachers stated that all the students in their classes had WEP in 8th grade, 27% stated that some students had WEP in 8th grade, 51% stated that their students did not have WEP, and 5% had no knowledge of it (EVA, 2015). According to another report from 2019, 62% of surveyed young people stated that they had taken the opportunity to acquire WEP in either the 8th or 9th grade (EVA, 2019). The report concluded that many students did not obtain WEP due to the relatively large personal efforts required to organize and complete it.

The study has clearly indicated that policies to re-actualize WEP as a CEG activity in both Sweden and Denmark are rooted in concerns about the reductions in applications for VET, and consequent mismatches between young people's educational choices and the labour market's need for skilled workers. In both the Swedish and Danish policy documents young peoples' lack of interest in VET is assumed to be due to a lack of contact, experience and knowledge of the world of work and lack of awareness of VET programs, with consequences including their educational choices to not be well founded and well prepared. Since compulsory schools in both countries were responsible for preparing them for education and work choices, it was assumed that the schools did not provide sufficient preparation.

THE REFORMS AND CEG PROVISION

Although the school's preparation of the young people was a central concern, the representation of WEP (and CEG) in the studied material expresses a certain view on CEG as instrumental for employability and economic growth rather than the pedagogical and civic dimensions of CEG.

This problem representation affects CEG in some interesting ways. In Denmark, the VET reform in 2013 (Regeringen, 2013) entailed a marked reduction in access to individual career guidance and introduction of more collective forms of CEG. Subsequent reforms (Regeringen, 2017, 2018) introduced a practical expertise dimension as part of the school's teaching, suggesting a shift of focus from career guidance to CEG activities, and thus a stronger emphasis on teachers' responsibility to prepare young people for educational choices. In addition, career guidance counsellors' role became more limited to the young people 'in danger' of not completing upper secondary education (Regeringen, 2013). In Sweden, although the need for reforms of CEG has been highlighted, the whole school approach has been criticized (Lovén, 2015; Lundahl et al., 2020) and a sweeping reform of schools' CEG provisions has been proposed (SOU 2019:4), the only major change has been in access to WEP.

As the reform of VET in Denmark was funded by cuts in career guidance provision, and neither the introduction of practical expertise and educational readiness assessments nor mandatory WEP in Sweden was supposed to entail significant additional costs, an economic rationale may have underpinned the choices of these 'solutions'. Hence, the 'solutions' could have been chosen at least partly because they seemed to be relatively easy, financially painless options. This raises the question whether the implementation of policies addressing WEP is adequately supported by CEG provisions for schools to provide sufficient preparation? Doubts can clearly be raised since research suggests that isolated episodes of WEP alone do not necessarily increase young people's interest in, or knowledge of, VET. It must be placed within a systematic and coherent CEG program (Thomsen et al., 2024).

WEP AS A TOOL FOR INCREASING INTEREST IN VET?

It is also questionable whether the policies addressing WEP expressed in the Swedish and Danish documents are likely to meet the goals to increase young people's interest in VET? As recent Danish research (Skovhus, 2018; Skovhus & Thomsen, 2020) has shown, the focus in CEG on students' education choices affects their participation and learning in connection with CEG activities. When the students have chosen an educational path, they lose interest in expanding their knowledge and do not get involved in the activities (Skovhus, 2018). Several Danish development projects on CEG and WEP have shown the importance of systematic, coherent CEG programs for young people to regard VET as a viable, attractive option (Louw, 2020; Skovhus, 2022). It is difficult to place WEP in a coherent CEG process if schools are not required to organize WEP, WEP is individualized, and thus its timing for students may vary, as in the Danish case. In the Swedish context, the quality requirements for the schools' organization of WEP are limited to its duration (in days) and equality of access to placements, which leaves it to the schools to choose how to organize and frame it depending on local resources and priorities.

The success of coherent and progressive CEG processes also reportedly depends on schools' and workplaces' abilities to cooperate, which can be both demanding and time-consuming (Beigi, 2019; Skovhus, 2022). The Swedish and Danish documents do not mention either

responsibilities or expectations of the labour market or employers regarding young people's experiences of the world of work. Responsibility for solving 'the mismatch problem' was laid upon the young people and the schools, rather than even partially on the labour market with the recognized 'need'. The changes to WEP-related legislation tended to individualize 'the mismatch problem' and cemented the view of compulsory school as the site for solving structural societal problems. This leaves it up to schools or the young people to secure adequate placements and the good-will of employers. How this affects the versatility and suitability of working life experiences that young people can obtain through WEP requires more research.

THE FRAMING OF WEP AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Finally, previous research has shown that the organization of WEP strongly influences young people's opportunities to participate in it and the nature of their learning, especially in terms of social justice (Ahier et al., 2000; Bimrose et al., 2014; Francis et al., 2005; Hatcher & Le Gallais, 2008; Hedenus & Wikstrand, 2015; Osgood et al., 2006; Skovhus & Poulsen, 2021). Placing responsibility for obtaining placements on the pupils as in the Danish case (Regeringen, 2013), could raise social justice concerns regarding access to WEP, as previous studies have identified social strata-based differences in the places and occupations that students can access (Hirasawa & Sundelin, 2003; Osgood et al., 2006). In Sweden it has been argued that the introduction of mandatory WEP and schools' responsibility to ensure that students have equal access to WEP could promote social justice and mitigate limitations of young peoples' educational choices by gender, social or cultural background (Prop. 2017/18:24).

It is questionable whether access to WEP is the only measure of the promotion of social justice. If expansion of the space of valued options is an important element of social justice, as suggested by Skovhus & Poulsen (2021), the framing of WEP as a learning process may also entail issues of social justice. Skovhus & Poulsen (2021) argue that it is not enough for young people to know about different vocations. They must feel that they are genuine alternatives, i.e., that they could actually do these jobs and would be seen as equally worthy of social recognition regardless of the path they choose. Broadening young peoples' educational and vocational horizons require the promotion of curiosity and reflection through preparation and follow-up on activities that increases awareness of different educational and vocational paths (e.g. Skovhus & Poulsen, 2021). Røise (2020) highlights the importance of the framing of CE-activities and the role of reflection, after finding that much time is often devoted to students' presentations of their experiences in follow-up activities, leaving too little time for reflection in Norwegian settings. Whether the framing of WEP as a learning process in the Swedish and Danish schools can address this issue requires more empirical research.

CONCLUSION

The study has revealed potentially valuable indications of the problem representations and assumptions underlying the re-actualization of WEP as a CEG activity in lower secondary education in Sweden and Denmark. The results show that in both countries its re-actualization was rooted in concerns about reductions in applications for VET, and consequent mismatches between young people's educational choices and the labour market's need for skilled workers. These mismatches have been attributed to young peoples' lack of interest in VET due to a lack of experience with the world of work and lack of awareness of VET programs, with consequences including their educational choices to not be well founded and well prepared. Since compulsory schools in both countries were responsible for preparing them for education and work choices, it was assumed that the schools did not provide sufficient preparation.

The study also showed that although schools' preparation of young people was a central concern there may be several issues related to social justice in the provision of CEG due to cuts in funding (in Denmark) and inability to reform its provision in Sweden. This raises three questions. First, is the implementation of policies addressing WEP adequately supported by CEG provisions for schools to provide sufficient preparation? Second, are the policies addressing WEP expressed in the Swedish and Danish documents likely to meet the goals to increase young people's interest in VET? Third, does the framing of WEP as a learning process in the Swedish and Danish schools support social justice understood as the expansion of the space of valued options?

This article has very clear spatial and temporal limitations, as it focuses on Swedish and Danish government policy documents on WEP published between 2013 and 2018 in order to understand the re-actualization of WEP as a CEG activity. In 2024, an obligation to provide five days of mandatory WEP for every student was introduced in Denmark from the 2024/2025 school year (Regeringen, 2024). Effects of this change are beyond the temporal scope of the article, but may be significant. In addition, the analysis focuses on policy as text (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009) to gain an understanding of the governments' intentions for the changes, but policy aims are not always achieved in practice as they "encounter complex organizational arrangements and already-existing practices" (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009 p.5). Thus, investigation of the policy implementation is required to obtain deeper understanding of the policies' effects in practice, but these are also beyond the scope of this article. However, both this and the three questions raised based on the key findings highlight a great need for further empirical research on the implementation of policies addressing WEP in Denmark and specially Sweden, since the Swedish research on this matter is limited. Such research would increase knowledge of optimal conditions for young people to experience working life and implications of these experiences for their career learning. Aspects that require particular research attention include the collaboration of schools and workplaces and the schools' preparation and follow-up of the young people's experiences. The relationships between young peoples' experiences of the world of work through WEP and their hopes, dreams, expectations, concerns and efforts to create meaning in the transition from compulsory school to secondary education also warrant further study.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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