



Danish Supervisors' Reasons for Hosting Lower Secondary Students in Work Experience Placements

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The article explores placement supervisors' reasons for hosting lower secondary students (ages 13-16) in work experience placements (WEP) in Denmark. The theoretical framework employs critical psychology to examine societal conditions, subjects' interpretations of these, and their reasons for actions, focusing on the perspective of placement supervisors as participants. Based on interviews with five supervisors who have hosted WEP, we describe five thematic groupings of reasons: providing an insight into the world of work; expanding young people's horizons and basis for making educational and vocational choices; recruiting apprentices and employees to the company and the field of work; added value for the company's activities; a sense of community responsibility. The reasons seem intertwined and not directly attributed to the interests of either the lower secondary students, the host companies or society. Finally, we discuss implications for practice and underline the significance of understanding supervisors' reasons for hosting lower secondary students in WEP.

ABSTRAKT

Artiklen undersøger praktikværterers begrundelser for at modtage skoleelever (13-16 år) i erhvervspraktik. Artiklens teoretiske grundlag er kritisk psykologi ud fra ønsket om at undersøge strukturelle betingelser knyttet til erhvervspraktik, hvordan praktikværterne tilskriver disse mening samt deres begrundelser for at tage skoleelever i praktik. Baseret på interviews med fem praktikvejledere, der har haft elever i erhvervspraktik, beskriver vi fem tematiske begrundelser: at give indblik i arbejdslivet; udvide unges horisonter og grundlag for uddannelses- og erhvervsvalg; rekruttere lærlinge og medarbejdere til virksomheden og arbejdsområdet; tilføje værdi til virksomhedens aktiviteter; en følelse af samfundsansvar. Grundene synes forbundne og ikke direkte tilskrevet interesserne hos hverken eleverne, værtsvirksomhederne eller samfundet som helhed. Afslutningsvis drøfter vi konsekvenserne for praksis og understreger vigtigheden af at forstå praktikvejledernes begrundelser for at tilbyde WEP.

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Work experience placement (WEP) refers to ‘a limited period of time, usually forming part of a course of study, during which someone works for a company or organisation in order to get work experience’ ([Cambridge Dictionary](#)). In this article, our focus is on WEP for lower secondary school students, and we define WEP as a career learning activity ‘where lower secondary students spend short periods in workplaces to gain practical insights by participating in various work-related activities without direct teacher supervision’ ([Kettunen et al., 2023](#)). WEP gives students the opportunity to observe and collaborate with professionals as they carry out their daily tasks, and it is an activity used across educational systems from lower secondary schools to universities. International research shows that WEP has the potential for a wide range of learning outcomes for students: an opportunity to expand their knowledge of and understanding of the world of work, try different tasks in a workplace and/or observe others through work shadowing, refine their understanding of their competencies and interests, and also to develop a more solid foundation for educational choices ([Buland et al., 2014](#); [Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014](#); [Mann, 2012](#); [Mann & Dawkins, 2014](#); [Watts, 1996](#)). However, some researchers also point out that WEP may have a negative outcome because it potentially ‘reflect and reproduce patterns of social class inequality, rather than to widen students’ vocational horizons’ ([Hatcher & Gallais, 2008, p. 2](#)).

WEP is a widely used and recommended activity to support students’ career learning ([Gatsby Charitable Foundation, 2014](#)). WEP is arranged between and requires cooperation between schools and companies. Schools often find that it is a major task to establish and develop partnerships with employers which can provide access to ‘high-quality placement opportunities’ ([Buzzeeo & Cifci, 2017, p. V](#)), and therefore ‘one of the most challenging aspects [...] is finding the opportunities’ ([Andrews & Hooley, 2018, p. 89](#)). Reasons behind this are often associated with lacking awareness amongst employers concerning how to get engaged, time and resource constraints, a perception or experience of burdensome regulatory requirements, and particular issues faced by the location, size, or sector of the employer ([Morris & Wade, 2005](#); [Shamash & Shoesmith, 2010](#)). This article aims to contribute insights that could foster a better understanding between schools and businesses. We do this by exploring a specific perspective that has received comparatively less attention, namely the WEP supervisors’ reasons for offering WEP to lower secondary students. This research is valuable in gaining knowledge about what placement supervisors consider important, enabling the utilization of this knowledge for future collaborations.

When examining the existing research on WEP, it becomes evident that the primary focus in many studies has been on students’ benefits, potential learning outcomes and their personal experiences during these activities ([Buland et al., 2014](#); [Buzzeeo & Cifci, 2017](#); [Messer, 2018](#); [Shamash & Shoesmith, 2010](#); [Smith et al., 2009](#); [Watts, 1996](#)). Research on the WEP supervisors’ perspective, benefits, or reasons for offering placements is scarce ([Shamash & Shoesmith, 2011](#)). In a literature review from 2010 based on a total of 53 sources and focusing on the value to business of offering WEP, [Shamash & Shoesmith \(2010\)](#) conclude that only part of the literature identifies benefits to the employers offering work experience while the predominant part includes ‘a thorough account of the barriers preventing or lessening the participation of businesses’ ([Shamash & Shoesmith, 2010, p. 2](#)). In 2011, [Shamash & Shoesmith](#) went on to publish an evaluation report based on the 2010 literature review, a survey of 192 employers who were signed up to the project Work Inspiration, and interviews for case studies of eight different institutions ([Shamash & Shoesmith, 2011](#)). This report identified four key impact areas: employee development and engagement, diversity and talent, business development, and community engagement ([Shamash & Shoesmith, 2011](#)). Based on a literature review on careers education across educational phases, [Millard and colleagues \(2019\)](#) additionally found that employers frequently report that work experience enables them to ‘develop the skills of young people who may become their future workforce’ ([Millard et al., p. 19](#)). In addition to encouraging the future workforce and wanting to provide a service to the community, [Morris & Wade](#) find that employers’ reasons for offering WEP include ‘the satisfaction of seeing young people ‘blossom over the course of a week’ ([Morris & Wade, 2005, p. 7](#)).

While studies on WEPs in lower secondary education are limited internationally and in Denmark, this is particularly true when focusing on the placement supervisors. With this study, we aim to bridge this gap by contributing to the academic discourse, benefiting both teachers and career guidance practitioners tasked with structuring meaningful WEP encounters, as

well as municipal authorities and school leaders responsible for effectively managing and orchestrating the delivery of WEP opportunities to lower secondary school students. Based on this, the question leading our research is: What subjective reasons do Danish work experience placement supervisors give for their decision to host lower secondary students (approximately ages 13 to 16) in work experience placements (WEP)? To contextualise our investigation, we will briefly overview the Danish organisation of WEP.

THE DANISH CONTEXT

In Denmark, children attend school from age five or six. Years 0 to 9 are mandatory, and Year 10 is optional (Undervisningsministeriet, 2023). In Years 8, 9 and 10, students receive career guidance from municipal youth guidance units to decide whether they want to continue into general upper secondary education programmes, which are supposed to prepare students for higher educational programmes, or into vocational upper secondary education programmes organised to prepare students for a career in a specific trade or industry (Undervisningsministeriet, 2022). Schools must provide career education throughout compulsory school (Undervisningsministeriet, 2023, §7).

WEP is a career learning activity that schools can choose to offer for students, but schools don't need to do so. However, if a school does not arrange WEP in Years 8 and 9, students still have the right to a one-week WEP (Undervisningsministeriet, 2023, §9). WEP is most used for the oldest grades, and a survey from 2019 showed that 62% of all 8th and 9th grade Danish students have participated in WEP (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2019).

The ministry presents the purpose of WEP for both parents and the business community. When addressing students' parents, it is emphasised that WEP gives students an impression of how a workplace functions and that there are different job functions and employees with various educational backgrounds at the company (Undervisningsministeriet, 2020). In a brochure addressed to the business community, the Ministry of Education writes about companies' potential benefits in receiving a WEP student. The ministry states that 'WEP serve as a showcase for your company and industry, offering excellent exposure for recruitment, as young individuals, through work experience programs, are given the opportunity to gain insights into their future professional life. Simultaneously, as a company, you also have the opportunity to gain a fresh perspective on your business.' Furthermore, it's emphasized that providing local schools access to companies adds value to the local community, as this contributes to enabling young individuals to envision a future within the local community. The brochure outlines the objective of work experience programs as 'providing young individuals with an understanding of your industry and specific workplace, such as the tasks you undertake, the tools and equipment you use, the competencies the job requires, and what makes your company unique' (Undervisningsministeriet, n.d.).

As mentioned earlier, WEP requires a high degree of collaboration between schools and companies (Andrews & Hooley, 2018). In this study, we are interested in gaining insight into why companies host students for WEP. In the following, we present the theoretical framework for the analysis of the study and the methodology employed.

CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As our theoretical framework, we draw inspiration from critical psychology, which is driven by a desire to study societal conditions, subjects' interpretations of these conditions, and their motivations for action, all from a participant perspective (Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013). In our case, we focus on the perspectives of WEP supervisors. Below, we introduce the three key concepts.

Societal conditions are mediated by society. The analytical focus is to explore 'how subjects respond to what they experience as their possibilities and conditions for action and how these possibilities and conditions are reproduced and transformed through their actions' (Skovhus & Thomsen, 2022, p. 6). In the analysis, our emphasis is to understand which societal conditions the WEP supervisors consider important in relation to WEP for lower secondary students.

Personal meanings can be described as the subjects' interpretations of their societal conditions. In the analysis, we search for the meanings that the WEP supervisors ascribe to the societal conditions 'because these meanings influence the lines of action and opportunities, they feel are open to them and the dilemmas they encounter' (Markard & Holzkamp, 1989).

Subjective reasons is the third concept guiding the analysis. Subjective reasons are understood as 'people's intentions with and reasons for doing what they do' (Højholt & Kousholt, 2019, p. 592). Analysis of subjective reasons involves searching for and trying to understand the links to associated societal conditions and personal meanings. As such, in the article, we seek to identify and understand the WEP supervisors' subjective reasons for hosting lower secondary students in WEP.

Even though these three concepts are described individually, it's crucial to understand them as interconnected. This understanding has implications for the analysis, such that, for instance, one cannot first examine the societal conditions in the material, then the personal meanings, and finally, the subjective reasons of WEP supervisors. This is rooted in critical psychology's perception that individuals mutually create conditions for each other within and as part of historical societal practice. They are not determined by the conditions but construct meanings from them in conjunction with others, thus having possibilities for action in relation to the conditions (Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013). Applying this triad as analytical concepts 'allow[s] us to describe, in a problem-centred way, the mediations between reasons for action and the societal circumstances under which they are functional' (Holzkamp, 2013, pp. 58–59).

METHODOLOGY

This article is based on empirical data from interviews with five WEP supervisors recruited as part of the project *Young people in practice* (in Danish: *Unge i praksis*). WEP supervisors are defined here as the employee(s)/manager(s) who consider themselves and are regarded by the host company or institution as primarily responsible for students during their WEP – even if the students interact with or shadow other employees during the WEP. The project is developed and conducted by the municipal education and career guidance unit in collaboration with five municipal youth guidance units and with support from the Tietgen Foundation. The project is aimed at Year 7 students (13 years old), who participate in two days of activities at a vocational college and a 1 to 3-day WEP at a company or institution where they work with tasks related to the vocational programme they visited (*Enhed for uddannelses- og erhvervsvejledning i kommunerne*, 2020). Parents are informed, and students are prepared prior to the activities at the vocational college and the WEP. The activities round off with a discussion and processing of the students' experience at the vocational college and during the WEP. Sometimes students participate in WEP in groups of three or four at various companies and institutions, other times WEP is organised so that an entire class is placed at the same company or institution, perhaps divided between different departments.

Recruitment for interviewees was based on various parameters, such as company size and public-private ownership. In terms of size, data range from a smaller company with 30 employees to a larger company with 150 employees. As for public-private ownership, both types of companies are represented (see Table 1).

TYPE OF COMPANY/ INSTITUTION	SIZE/NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	OWNERSHIP	TYPE OF WEP
Manufacturing company (plastic)	39	Limited company	Group of 3–4
Manufacturing company (steel)	52	Limited company	Group of 3–4
Manufacturing and repairs within the maritime sector	30	Limited company	Group of 3–4
Supermarket	150	Self-owned company	Class (app. 20 students)
Care facility	140	Municipal enterprise	Class (app. 20 students)

Table 1 Overview of the different types of companies/institutions and the types of WEP offered as part of the *Young people in practice* project.

All interviewees have been responsible for the WEP, both in the sense that they have planned the WEP, and have interacted with the students during the WEP. Three interviewees had

hosted groups of three or four students in WEP, while the other two had hosted entire classes (approximately 20 students). Additionally, all supervisors had previously hosted WEP for students, including individual placements (lasting 1–5 days). The interviews took place within the company/institution premises and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. They centred around the question, "Why does your company provide WEP for lower secondary students?" This question served as a foundation for an exploratory discussion, during which the interviewer aimed to grasp the interviewees' interests and knowledge. This approach ensured that the interviews remained focused while allowing the WEP supervisors the flexibility to introduce additional perspectives beyond the initial question. The interviews were scheduled approximately one to two weeks after the students' WEP. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using a simple transcription strategy focused on accurately representing the core meaning of what was being said (Tanggaard & Brinkmann, 2010).

In all phases of the project, we adopt the critical psychology's framework of meanings, reasons, and condition analysis as a foundational theoretical understanding (Kousholt, 2018). This framework is evident in the research question's utilization of the term 'reasons.'

All authors independently read the interview transcripts multiple times, carefully searching for passages reflecting the supervisors' personal meanings, subjective reasons, and societal conditions related to offering WEP. During this stage, all authors individually conducted coding of the empirical data. Subsequently, the authors convened to compare their codes, and to engage in discussions of differences and similarities. This cross-sectional reading was rooted in the analysis of societal conditions, personal meaning, and subjective reasons. This means that our thematization focuses on how societal conditions are ascribed meanings by the different interviewees and how the interviewees participate as supervisors for work experience placement based on the conditions (Kousholt, 2018). Through our readings, we sought to describe themes that would capture what was at stake for WEP supervisors when focusing on their subjective reasons for inviting students to WEP. We were able to describe five thematic groupings. Each of these groups was given a name sufficiently broad to embrace variation. Thus, the themes came from our theoretical and focused look at the empirical material. The themes are diverse and constitute various aspects of the supervisors' reasons for hosting students in WEP. Thus, the theory provides both a structuring basis for the reading and simultaneously opens various analytical possibilities and interpretations (Kousholt, 2018).

- Providing an insight into the world of work
- Expanding young people's horizons and basis for making educational and vocational choices
- Recruiting apprentices/employees to the company and/or field of work
- Added value for the company/institution's activities
- A sense of community responsibility

Each of the five themes is presented below. In the presentation, we seek to describe the analytical connections between the three concepts (personal meanings, subjective reasons, and societal conditions) in order to gain a nuanced understanding of the WEP supervisors' reasons for hosting lower secondary students in WEP.

While the research's reliance on interviews with only five WEP supervisors may be seen as a potential limitation, our objective is not to draw generalisations beyond the scope of these interviews. Rather, our aim is to offer an initial understanding of the reasons why WEP supervisors choose to host lower secondary students in WEP. Further, the article is limited to examining the voices of WEP supervisors from companies and institutions that predominantly have employees with vocational qualifications. Voices representing other types of companies, where the employees have other educational backgrounds, are not part of the data material. Additionally, only WEP supervisors hosting lower secondary students in WEP are part of the empirical data. Interviews with supervisors who have not hosted such students or have only done so infrequently, and subsequently opted out of hosting are not included. It could nuance the understanding of the WEP supervisors' reasons if in future research, there is a focus on creating variation in relation to the mentioned aspects when WEP supervisors are to be recruited.

In the following, we present each of the five categories of supervisors' reasons for hosting lower secondary students in WEP.

PROVIDING INSIGHT INTO THE WORLD OF WORK

All the WEP supervisors point out that today lower secondary students generally have limited insight into the world of work and what it takes to be a part of the labour market, especially in jobs other than those held by their parents. A WEP supervisor shares his experience:

'Many young people have inaccurate conceptions of what it means to work at a manufacturing company. When you, as a young person, think about the adult world of work, it can be full of ghosts and misconceptions. That is why I believe that it can be interesting for students to enter a workplace and see what it consists of. What is the work that we do here [...]? We want to influence. To have an impact on their feelings towards what it means to be a part of the labour market'.

Another supervisor gives an example of young people hired as trainees by the company:

'They enter the labour market with a new kind of expectation – an expectation of a job that makes a difference in their life. The job must be developing for them. They expect for the entire two years [the supervisor refers to the length of the educational program for sales trainees in the company] to feel that it is beneficial to them. There are many opportunities in the company, and many of the trainees want to have those opportunities. Basically, they all have a feeling of wanting the job, but the problem is that many of them haven't learned what it takes'.

The WEP supervisors emphasise that it is a societal condition for today's young people that they only have limited insight into the world of work. The supervisors understand themselves and their company as a part of the conditions structuring students' opportunity to get an impression of the world of work. And this is an important reason why they offer WEP.

The analysis also indicates that all the WEP supervisors ascribe meaning to organising WEP in ways that are interesting and varied for the students. This is why the WEP supervisors prioritise that the students 'are given the chance to do something practical'. They stress that students learn more from hands-on practical experience than merely observing. They ascribe meaning to experience-based learning, wanting to give the students the opportunity to gain physical experience with varied tasks that come as close as possible to 'the real work' at the company – as close as possible for a student who is not a skilled worker. Also, they state that practical tasks should be of a certain quality to be meaningful for students. In a manufacturing company, for example, sweeping the floor to prevent contamination of the various components being manufactured might be an important task. But if students in a WEP are only entrusted to sweep the floor – an activity which can be characterised as 'repetitive tasks with no scope for wider career exploration and skill development' (Buzzeo & Cifci, 2017, p. 7) – they may feel that they are being used as 'cheap labour'. The supervisors highlight that this can reduce the experience of meaning and commitment among the students, which the analysis indicates the supervisors ascribe meaning to facilitate.

Several WEP supervisors point out challenging conditions when wanting to give the students insight into real and interesting work tasks and describe how they handle these to try and create meaningful WEPs for the students. For example, as a condition for the WEP, the supervisor at a care facility highlights that the students are only in the WEP for a short time and that this has an impact on the work tasks the students can be introduced to. This means that students in WEP here do not participate in tasks to do with personal hygiene for the residents because there are 'certain ethical concerns in relation to our residents'. The WEP supervisor sees this as a condition, and she handles it by finding other relevant tasks that can provide the students with practice experience that the students find meaningful. An example is that the students are introduced to 'how we work with the residents' life stories', and the students themselves are given the task of 'interviewing some of the residents and planning and conducting activities with these residents'.

Insurance as a condition for WEP is pointed out by a WEP supervisor at a manufacturing company. He describes restrictions in terms of which tasks lower secondary students are actually allowed to perform during their WEP. He highlights that these conditions become barriers to the students' opportunities to practically engage with those of the company's tasks that the WEP supervisor assesses as interesting for the students to try. Namely that the students try to work with some of the company's machines, he argues that:

'Work experience placements have become very difficult compared to previously. When I was in work experience placement 30 years ago, I worked for a week on some items on a lathe [...]. This is completely unthinkable today'.

The supervisor also argues that one of the reasons why he chooses to join the collaboration with the municipal youth guidance unit, which organises the WEP, is that he sees it as one of his opportunities to address barriers (see Shamash & Shoesmith, 2011) and thereby influence the structural conditions that exist for WEP for lower secondary school students. He wants new insurance policies to be drawn up so it will be easier to give the students a good experience and a better insight into working life. New insurance policies will allow students to gain practical experience with real work tasks by using real machines. Thus, the supervisor ascribes meaning to addressing and trying to influence the structural conditions in the form of insurance issues which reduces the students' opportunity to try hands-on practical work tasks and thereby reducing their opportunity to get a more realistic and interesting experience of the job. This is one of his reasons for joining a collaboration on WEP.

To sum up, the analysis shows that a crucial reason for the supervisors to host WEP is to give young people the opportunity to gain insight into the world of work. For the supervisors, this is connected to the societal conditions that lower secondary students generally have limited access to and insight into the world of work. Additionally, the supervisors ascribe meaning to organise the placements in a pedagogical way taking into account the societal conditions that apply, such as insurance. Also, a desire to influence the societal conditions for the work experience placement can be a reason for WEP supervisors to participate.

EXPANDING HORIZONS AND BASIS FOR MAKING EDUCATIONAL AND VOCATIONAL CHOICES

Allowing young people to become acquainted with jobs, companies, and institutions that they are not familiar with due to their family background and social context is a reason for most of the supervisors for offering WEP. It can likewise open the students' eyes to the wide range of job opportunities and tasks within a company or institution. A supervisor puts it this way:

'Everyone hears about their father's and mother's job, but on this placement, they have suddenly seen five or six functions which, perhaps, if we are lucky, are not like their mother's and father's segment at all. So now they have a much wider experience of what happens in a factory.'

The analysis also indicates that this supervisor considers that a person's choices and progression in life are situated and inextricably tied to the position from where this person views life, and this position limits which possibilities are visible to them (Hodkinson et al., 2006). The supervisor ascribes meaning to an emancipatory understanding of career education, which is about expanding students' horizons and challenging their perception of what is possible and impossible (Hooley, 2015).

Several WEP supervisors ascribe meaning to giving students concrete images of something that might otherwise appear abstract to them. For example, exemplifying what tasks a 'maritime craftsman' can have or helping them understand concepts linked to working life. The supervisor at the supermarket gives an example, 'Well, what does it mean to a 7th grade student that a company offers career opportunities? It is much easier for them to understand when placed within a workplace context.' The supervisor explains that this is why she introduces the students to her own career path. She also ascribes meaning to giving students the opportunity to begin and relate to themselves as future potential employees in a workplace. She says:

'To be considered as nearly an adult is important to them. Knowing that you have a responsibility. Because both the teacher and I made sure the students knew that

when they stepped in here [into the supermarket], they were employees in the supermarket. They liked that. I gave them a polo shirt with the store's name on it. And they all got a name tag. It was really cool for them to step into that role, they were very positive about it.'

Self-understanding is a critical psychological concept concerned with the process of becoming (Holzkamp, 1998). With this concept, the focus is on movements and doing things differently. This also addresses the context in which the movement takes place, and it can provide an opportunity for the movement. The analysis of the supervisor's narrative indicates that she ascribes meaning to creating a context for the lower secondary students to gain experience in presenting themselves as someone who can take responsibility, participate relevantly in a work-related societal practice, and be considered legitimate participants in a working community.

The analysis indicates that one of the supervisors' reasons for opening the company door for lower secondary school students for WEP is that the supervisor wants to support that the students – through the experience they gain with working life and a specific business – get a more solid basis for a beginning reflection on their wishes for education and working life as well as for the career choices they will have to make in the future. The supervisor wants to support that 'the choices the students make are based on own experience to a greater extent' rather than prejudices and notions, for example about vocational education.

This category of reasons is intertwined with the third theme below where the supervisors discuss how WEP can help pique the students' interest in the field of work and at the same time help the companies with the goal of recruiting apprentices or employees, now or in the future.

RECRUITING APPRENTICES/EMPLOYEES TO THE COMPANY AND FIELD OF WORK

It is a societal condition that Denmark, like many other European countries, lacks skilled labour, and it seems that this will also be the case in the future (Arbejderbevægelsens erhvervsråd, 2021). All the WEP supervisors are concerned about this. For example, the supervisor at a large care facility says that 'the elderly population is increasing explosively. We very much need skilled staff. It is said that every fourth 16-year-old should be trained in this area if we are to have enough employees in the long term.'

Another supervisor highlights that it is important that the company continues to attract a diverse range of apprentices and employees. He says:

'I can see that the segment of those who are looking for an internship at our company gets more and more narrow. If it's only one type who comes because all the others have gone to general upper secondary education because they had no idea that a plastics-processing operator exists, then it all becomes very uniformly. So that's why it's important for us to get people out here and have a look.'

As such, WEP is an important way of introducing a wide range of young people to the opportunities that the company and field of work can offer, including young people planning to enrol in general upper secondary education.

The analysis indicates that for all the supervisors, one of their reasons for offering WEP is that the supervisors hope that the placement contributes to the students broadening their horizons and opening their eyes to the fact that the company and the related industry are interesting for training and work, and that the WEP can lead to some of the students becoming interested in the profession. A supervisor says: 'Through the placement, we help the students consider vocational education as an option. We can brand ourselves.'

Another supervisor mentions that the WEP can contribute to the student's parents becoming aware that this could be a potential educational path for their child. Some supervisors highlight that they do not expect a 'one-to-one return' but believe in 'a spread effect.' A supervisor describes that perhaps the student who has had a WEP does not himself become interested in the area, 'but he goes home and tells his older brother that "I have just seen this."' And the supervisor continues: 'If I have had four students on placement out here, then they go home to their four families and tell them about it, who again tell about it to someone else.'

That is, one of the reasons for opening the company door for lower secondary school WEP is that the supervisors consider that the WEP can contribute to opening the eyes of a wide group of students to the possibilities in the company and the industry – and to the lower secondary school students who otherwise are oriented towards a general upper secondary education. The supervisors ascribe meaning to influence the students' horizons for actions (Hodkinson et al., 2006) and influence the social environment in which the young people must make an educational choice.

Several supervisors point out that the WEP can potentially contribute to the recruitment of an apprentice after Year 9 or 10 or contribute to the company 'finding an apprentice more easily' in a few years when the young people have completed a general upper secondary education. Thus, the supervisors have a longer perspective on the effect of their efforts. All the participating supervisors agree that, while this is the hope, such a 'direct return' on investment in WEP cannot be expected. One can hope that making such efforts as a company will bear fruit in the long term, but recruiting apprentices or employees is not the primary reason for hosting WEP.

ADDED VALUE FOR THE COMPANY/INSTITUTION'S ACTIVITIES

In addition to recruiting apprentices and employees, the placement supervisors also ascribe meaning to host WEP for lower secondary students for other reasons. Several supervisors state that hosting lower secondary students in WEP provides added value for one or more of the company's activities here and now.

The placement supervisor at a large supermarket hosted an entire class as part of the *Young people in practice* project and stated that, when the class was at the store, 'things might have been a bit slower than normal.... We used a lot more resources than the help we received', which was just what the supervisor had expected. However, the supervisor describes how hosting the students also served a purpose in terms of the young trainees at the supermarket. These trainees were assigned a special role in relation to the lower secondary students in WEP. This way, the supermarket's trainees gained experience in presenting themselves 'professionally and being the adult and being given the chance to teach them something.' The supervisor ascribes meaning to the fact that the WEP hereby support the company's goal of providing interesting and stimulating training programmes for trainees.

A reason not related to staff development is described by the supervisor at a large care facility, namely that the lower secondary students contribute to the purpose of supporting life quality for the residents through care and activities. She describes that one reason for hosting lower secondary students in WEP is related to the societal condition that the residents, to some extent, live separated from the local community and younger generations. Hosting lower secondary students in WEP is a way to let the local community into the care centre and bring

'joy and vitality to the care facility. A lot of the elderly residents think it's fun when there are visitors, and they find it amusing to talk to the young people and listen to them laugh. It is really important for our residents to experience life the way it is nowadays.'

So, the supervisor ascribes meaning to spending time on WEP since she finds it helps the institution to meet its purpose.

To sum up, the analysis indicates that the WEP supervisors welcome and ascribe meaning to the side benefits when lower secondary students in WEP contribute something to the activities at the host organisation, even if these are not put forward as a primary reason for offering themselves as a WEP company.

A SENSE OF COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY

Wishing to give back to their local community for altruistic reasons is a reason why employers offer WEP (Eddy Adams et al., 2008; Millard et al., 2019; Morris & Wade, 2005; Ofsted, 2016). Many employers explain that they think engaging with schools is a 'good thing to do' or they want to engage more with the local community (Bimrose et al., 2014, p. 22). In this study, as mentioned before, some of the supervisors' link offering WEP to what they see as a societal

condition, namely that it is difficult for many children and young people to gain a broad insight into jobs and working life outside the family's jobs. The reason for several supervisors for opening the company door for lower secondary students is related to this societal condition. They ascribe meaning to supporting young people in general as well as in the local community in their development and in gaining an insight into the world of work.

Being a good neighbour is ascribed meaning by some of the WEP supervisors and they see an inviting attitude towards the local area's children and young people as related to this. The WEP supervisor at a large care facility formulates it in this way:

'With the institution's towering local presence, both figuratively and literally with buildings that cover large swathes of land, we have a responsibility to help ensure a good relationship with neighbours and nurture positive attitudes towards and an understanding of the institution. We want to be a visible part of the local community, and inviting some of the young people in the community into the care facility and giving them an insight into what goes on inside its walls helps in this regard.'

The supervisor links this reason for hosting WEP to other initiatives to establish and strengthen ties with the local community, such as collaborating with local kindergartens during the holiday season.

So, this study nuances the understanding of employers' views on what giving back to the local community means and their reasons for wanting to do this. Two reasons are identified; one is linked to the employers ascribing meaning to mitigate the impact of societal conditions by supporting local young people in getting acquainted with the world of work. And one is related to being a good neighbour.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the analysis indicates that WEP supervisors find that children and young people have only limited insight into the world of work due to the societal condition that lower secondary students' opportunities to gain insight into jobs and working life are rather small. One of the supervisors' reasons for offering themselves as WEP supervisors is that they ascribe meaning to creating better conditions for students to get insight into jobs and working life. And the supervisors consider that their company can contribute hereto.

The analysis also shows that the supervisors' reasons for offering themselves and their company for WEPs are predominantly bipartite. On the one hand, it is due to a desire to expand the student's horizons for actions (Hodkinson et al., 2006) through a wider knowledge of different jobs and educational opportunities. Several of the WEP supervisors in this analysis point to a special responsibility towards the young people in the local community. On the other hand, there is a desire to expand the company's or industry's ability to recruit apprentices and labour now and in the long term.

The companies and institutions that hosted the WEP all have employees with vocational qualifications. For several years, in Denmark, the status of vocational education and training has continued to decline, and there seems to exist an educational hierarchy that affords greater prestige to general upper secondary education programmes than vocational education and training. It is argued that this has the consequence that not enough young people choose a vocational education after compulsory school (Egedal, 2015). Furthermore, it is currently a societal condition that there is a lack of skilled workers in Denmark, and the need is expected to increase (Arbejderbevægelsens Erhvervsråd, 2021). As mentioned, all WEP companies and institutions from which the informants originate predominantly employ employees with vocational education and training. The supervisors' reasons for offering WEPs and their effort to show the entire group of students that there are other ways to go when you want an interesting and opportunity-giving education than to take a general upper secondary education, can be understood as linked to this societal condition that too few young people choose vocational education and training. As such, some of the WEP supervisors' reasons include perspectives that can be seen as related to the financial interests of the host organization in terms of recruiting qualified, skilled, and committed employees who can help maintain or increase productivity and thereby safeguard revenue and profit levels. At the same time, recruitment as a reason for

hosting WEPs implies a belief that it will eventually become difficult to properly perform critical societal functions, such as caring for the elderly, without attracting more people to the field. In this regard, some of the supervisors' reasoning is tied to a sense of social responsibility.

One might be critical of WEP, which occurs during school hours, being used to promote the financial interests of privately-owned companies. However, some WEP supervisors stress that, while the company may be interested in recruitment, it can only be seen as a potential bonus as it remains unclear to what extent hosting lower secondary students in WEP supports recruitment.

Another perspective on the reasons for providing insight into the world of work and contributing to broadening horizons is to understand the reasons in a pedagogical perspective and a sense of community. The purpose of the Danish municipal primary and lower secondary schools is

'to provide students with the knowledge and skills that will prepare them for further education and training and instil in them the desire to learn more ... create a framework that provides opportunities for experience, in-depth study and allows for initiative so that students develop awareness and imagination and confidence in their own possibilities and backgrounds such that they are able to commit themselves and are willing to take action' (Undervisningsministeriet, 2023, §1).

It can be argued that the WEP supervisors' reasons for contributing to WEP opportunities play into the same preoccupation as is reflected in the purpose of the school. The fact that students become familiar with workplaces, working life, concrete jobs and tasks can give them a desire to learn more and the WEP can create conditions to develop awareness and imagination and confidence in their own possibilities. In that sense, the analysis in this article indicates that the supervisors' reasons can be understood in relation to the school's work, based on a desire to support the students' development, outlook and agency. Several supervisors also highlight as a reason that the company or institution has a special responsibility towards cohesion in the local environment, i.e. a desire to give back to the local community which Shamash & Shoesmith also find (2010).

In Denmark, there has been a political focus on increasing the number of young people choosing vocational education and training for several years (Regeringen, Venstre, Dansk Folkeparti, Socialistisk Folkeparti, Konservative Folkeparti og Liberal Alliance, 2014) with various prognoses regarding an expected shortfall in skilled labour (Arbejderbevægelsens erhvervsråd, 2016, 2021). As such, and with all the interviewed WEP supervisors working in companies and institutions that employ people with vocational qualifications, one might have expected the analysis to find recruitment as the primary reason for hosting WEPs. However, the analysis suggests a more complex and multifaceted reality. The reasons seem intertwined and thus inseparable. Furthermore, none of these categories of reasons can be directly attributed to the interests of the lower secondary students, the host companies or society. Like other aspects of career guidance and counselling, work experience 'operates at the interface between the individual and society...' (Watts, 2015, p. 171).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

We argue that familiarity with supervisors' reasons for hosting lower secondary students in WEPs is important knowledge for teachers, career counsellors and careers leaders, while working to recruit and create future collaborations on WEP and develop the collaborations already established. It is also important knowledge for the municipalities and school managers who manage and coordinate the work on offering WEPs for lower secondary students.

While this article provides knowledge of WEP supervisors' reasons, which is important for people in the field, it is important to keep in mind that the data on which this article is based comprises interviews with only five WEP supervisors. The knowledge that is produced gives rise to further questions, calling for additional research on work experience and the reasons, experiences, and reflections of WEP supervisors. These questions include what other reasons for choosing to host lower secondary students in WEPs a larger-scale study, perhaps including other types of companies and institutions, might reveal. The analysis also raises questions regarding the reasons why other companies and institutions choose not to host such WEPs and the form, content, and practical implementations of WEPs in various host organisations.

Based on qualitative interviews with five WEP supervisors, we have identified five categories of reasons for hosting lower secondary students in WEPs: providing an insight into the world of work; expanding young people's horizons and basis for making educational and vocational choices; recruiting apprentices/employees to the company and/or field of work; a sense of community responsibility; and added value for the company/institution's activities. These themes emerge as intertwined and thus inseparable. Furthermore, none of these themes can be directly attributed to the interests of neither the lower secondary students, the host organisations nor society as a whole. Overall, the reasons are aligned with an emancipatory understanding of careers education, even though some of the reasons given concern the company or institution's ability to recruit skilled employees and thereby safeguard their productivity, profit and/or performance of critical societal functions. We argue that the knowledge generated by this study can help professionals in the field with their efforts to develop high-quality WEPs for lower secondary students.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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