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Title:
Who will mind the gap?
Compulsory schools´ and employers´ engagement in Swedish career education

Authors:
Lisbeth Lundahl (corresponding author), Umeå University. lisbeth.lundahl@umu.se
Ann-Sofie Holm, Gothenburg University, ann-sofie.holm@ped.gu.se
Michael Lindblad, Umeå University, michael.lindblad@umu.se
Anders Lovén, Malmö University, anders.loven@mau.se
Ewa Rolfsman, Umeå University, ewa.rovfsman@umu.se

Abstract (max 150 words)
The paper critically analyses working life aspects of the informal career learning curriculum in Swedish compulsory schools. It aims at understanding how key features of present working life and the highly decentralized and marketized education context interact with and shape the informal curricula of Swedish career education. The paper uses Bernstein´s (2000) curriculum theory, especially regarding power, control and discourses, and Stanley and Mann’s (2016) theoretical framework of employer engagement in education. It is based on two questionnaires, case studies in five schools and analysis of texts from school and working life actors. The findings indicate that a considerable part of counsellors´ work is assigned to helping students navigate in the dense school jungle, while career learning activities concerning working life and occupations often are few and scattered.

Keywords: career education, career learning, state involvement, employers, transition policies

Relation to conference theme
Critically analysing working life aspects of the career-learning curriculum of Swedish compulsory schools, in a situation of marketized upper secondary education, the paper asks: What contents, activities and actors are young people exposed to and to what extent can it help them forming their careers through these double markets?

Research questions, objectives and theoretical framework
Strategies and instruments aiming to facilitate young people´s school-to-work transitions, e.g. career education and counselling (CEG) have become central policy matters at national level and in the European Union (Bengtsson 2016; Jørgensen et al. 2019, Sultana 2012; Watts & Sultana 2004). The raised political interest in CEG rests on assumptions that they may serve economic, learning and social purposes. Research has shown that they may have such effects (Hooley et al. 2014; Hughes et al 2016). While CEG always has had to relate to working life, school-choice and privatization of education (Verger et al. 2016) means that schools, career
practitioners and students in many countries also have to overview and engage in local and regional educational markets. However, the knowledge is still sparse how career-learning curricula, in particularly concerning working life matters, are affected by this double market situation (see however Hooley et al 2018).

Sweden constitutes an interesting case, as compulsory school students currently not only have to choose among upper secondary programs, but also between a myriad of competing public and private (“free”) upper secondary schools, intensely marketing themselves e.g. via large school fairs, open houses, prospects, homepages and school visits (Lundahl et al. 2013). In contrast, Swedish teenagers have gradually had reduced access to working life experience, e.g. through school based work experience (“prao”) and vacation jobs (however 2 weeks of “prao” has recently become mandatory). From the mid-nineties, the state does not regulate the forms for working life orientation in compulsory school, and presently, systematic collaboration between schools and working life actors is largely lacking. This is puzzling, considering the shortage of skilled workforce, decreased attractiveness of upper secondary VET and scarce apprenticeship training despite many expansion efforts (Jørgensen et al. 2019). Entrepreneurial learning being part of the national curricula should also speak in favour of initiatives to strengthen career learning. According to the Swedish national curriculum, professional and impartial CEG is a responsibility of the whole school. In reality, the career counsellors receive this task, and there is no school subject or hours in the time schedule specifically assigned to career learning (Swedish Parliament 2018).

The aim of this paper is to understand how key features of present working life and the highly decentralized and marketized education context interact with and shape the informal curricula of Swedish career education in compulsory school. For practical reasons we delimit the analysis of working life actors to the employers and their organisations.

We want to answer the following research questions:

(1) How can one describe and understand schools´ engagement (or lack thereof) in career learning about working life and occupations?
(2) How can one describe and understand employers´ engagement (or lack thereof) in career learning about working life and occupations?
(3) How does the school market situation influence Swedish career education curriculum more generally, and what possible consequences does it have on career learning about working life in particular?

Even though this is not a comparative paper, some outlooks are made to Denmark, Finland and Great Britain.

Bernstein’s (2000) curriculum theory is useful for analysing power and control (classification and framing aspects) of the career education curriculum and its dominating pedagogic discourses. Further, the paper uses parts of Stanley and Mann’s (2014) theoretical framework for employer engagement in education to analyse the relationship to the school curriculum (supplementary, complementary or additional) and the intended results on young people´s career development in terms of human capital, social and cultural capital.
Methods and sources

The paper emanates from the research project “Learning for career management skills”, funded by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working life and Welfare.

The paper is mainly based on

(1) A web-based questionnaire to career counsellors (N=81) in 70 compulsory schools situated in a large variety of municipalities. Here the counsellors described career education and counselling in a number of respects, including the scope and character of engagement of external actors,

(2) Case studies in five schools from five different types of municipalities. These studies included observations, interviews with students, head teachers, counsellors and a selection of teachers, and analysis of written material,

(3) Analysis of homepage contents and other material from schools and organisations-representatives of the labour market identified in the career counsellor survey and in the case studies.

(4) Data from a questionnaire study among 1522 grade 9-students in 70 municipalities. Some of the questionnaire questions are identical to those of a previous study in 22 OECD countries, however not including Sweden (Sweet et al., 2014).

First findings

Career development activities related to the impending choices of upper secondary schools and programs dominate the career-learning curriculum. A considerable part of counsellors’ work is assigned to helping students navigate in the dense school jungle, and out-of-school career activities tend to focus choice of upper secondary alternatives. Swedish grade 9 students report fewer acquired career competencies inside and outside school than Finnish and Danish students do, but information about educational programs constitutes an exception. School organised work experience is the most frequent work-related activity, inviting external actors who give brief career talks the second most frequent. Commonly, organisations specialising in young people’s career choices act on behalf of private and public employers and employer organisations. Only half of the students have made study visits to a place of work. The input to school CEG from working life actors parallels the characterisation of the British equivalent: “short duration, episodic, and unintegrated into any programme of study with defined learning outcomes” (Hughes et al. 2016, 34). In sum, the current Swedish CEG resembles the British VET situation: a combination of low state engagement and low employer involvement (Busemeyer & Vossiek 2016).

References


