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Title: Nordic research on educational and vocational guidance: a systematic literature review of thematic features between 2003 and 2016

Year: 2019

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

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Please cite the original version:

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

Nordic research on educational and vocational guidance – an exploratory review of thematic features between 2003 and 2016

Introduction

Educational and vocational guidance is sometimes characterised as a 'globally travelling idea'. It exists in some form in most developed countries and many developing countries. However, little attention has been given to how context shapes the concept of educational and vocational guidance as it travels across the globe (McMahon, Watson, & Patton, 2014). The intention of this article is to explore the patterns of prominent themes in the research on educational and vocational guidance in the Nordic countries from 2003 to 2016. By this, our aim is to provide insight to research-based knowledge grounded in the Nordic context – relevant for both practitioners and policy makers on a national, Nordic, and international level.

The Nordic Region (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, as well as the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland) displays strong cultural, political, and geographical similarities that make it appropriate for analysis as a unified area. (The Nordic Council of Ministers, 2017). Despite the cultural and political similarities of the Nordic countries, they are less homogenous than outsiders often assume. Superficial similarities mask substantial differences, which manifest in various aspects of culture, education and employment, as well as different routes in the political and practical development of guidance. In this context, Plant, Christiansen, Lovén, Vilhjálmsdóttir & Vuorinen (2003) conducted a review on current trends in educational and vocational guidance research in the Nordic Region. In the 2003 review, they concluded that the amount of existing research was relatively small, and that the Nordic countries had followed slightly different – if complementary – paths in terms of research in educational and vocational guidance (Plant, et al., 2003). The reasons for conducting a new review fifteen years later include – among others – the many new developments, which have affected the Nordic guidance field during this period.

Since 2003, Denmark has experienced a profound re-organising of career guidance, through a professionalisation strategy and the forming of independent youth career guidance centres. However, now the centres are facing severe cutbacks and are merging with other youth guidance initiatives to form one-stop shops and focus the service on the 20% of young people most in need of guidance. Norway on the other hand, has had an uplift in terms of policy interest and funding. The country has established regional career centres for adults and has created a compulsory career-learning program in secondary school. All of this supported by the development of a new Masters in career guidance and a growth of research and evaluation. A governmental green paper from 2016 pointed to the need for a holistic all-age guidance offer and a national quality framework that is now taking

shape. Iceland has introduced a universal right to career guidance, in the midst of its severe economic crises, and has introduced innovative approaches to regionalised workplace guidance.

Sweden has carried out several important developments including the development of new career guidance approaches for immigrants coming to Sweden. In Finland, they have created a national strategy for lifelong guidance to develop cross-sectoral provision at national, regional and local levels. The Finnish strategy covers equal access to services, career management skills, guidance practitioner competences, quality assurance, and cross-sectoral cooperation and coordination. Currently, the country faces a major reform in the organisation of the public employment sector in 2020. If proposed legislation goes through, public employment services will merge into new regionally organised Growth services, delivered by private companies. This reform will include major challenges such as the overall coordination and management of the services.

Overall, this depicts a volatile situation, and an intensified policy interest, aligned with a growing number of scholarly studies. The involved Nordic scholars, though few in numbers, have been highly active in research, and thus, in providing robust inputs to the policymaking processes and development of research-based practice, both on a national level and on an international level.

Method

A team of national experts on educational and vocational guidance research from the five Nordic countries assembled to collaborate in the review process. In accordance with recommendations for completion of systematic literature reviews (Creswell, 2013) exemplified by Hughes, Mann, Barnes, Baldauf, & McKeown, (2016), the study adhered to the following:

- Setting review parameters—refining the review question, defining keywords, and developing the search strategy;
- Searching—the systematic identification of potentially relevant research using a keyword strategy;
- Screening—the application of pre-determined criteria to report titles, abstracts, and full texts derived from the review question and related sub-questions;
- Synthesis and reporting—the analysis and identification of key findings.

Setting review parameters

Our aim was to look for thematic features in the research on educational and vocational guidance in the five Nordic countries from 2003 to 2016. By this, our intention was to explore key features in educational and vocational guidance research in a given period and context.

The research included both empirical and theoretical contributions from peer reviewed articles/book chapters, PhD theses, anthologies and evaluative reports (grey literature). As evident in several articles (e.g. Lovén, 2003; McMahon, 2014), educational, vocational and career guidance is used, to some extent, synonymously to cover the same phenomenon. In the different Nordic languages, the same variety in the use of concepts is evident. Although we use educational and vocational guidance as an overall concept in this article, we included the following keywords in the search phase of the review: educational, (or/and) vocational (or/and) guidance in the respective languages of the countries (Iceland: náms- og starfsráðgjöf; Norway: yrkesveiledning, utdannings- og

yrkesrådgivning, yrkes- og utdanningsrådgivning, karriereveiledning and karriererådgivning; Sweden: studie- och yrkesvägledning; Finland: uraohjaus, urasuunnittelun ohjaus, opinto-ohjaus, oppilaanohjaus; Denmark: vejledning). Further, we included research from a Nordic context written in English. Here, we used the keywords educational, (or/and) vocational (or/and) career (or/and) guidance. In our view, the different areas covered in the research literature coincide with the definition of educational and vocational guidance developed in the ELGPN Glossary (2014). There, Educational guidance is defined as "Helping an individual to reflect on personal educational issues and experiences and to make appropriate educational choices", while vocational guidance is defined as "Help for individuals to make choices about education, training and employment" (ELGPN, 2014).

Searching and screening

The guidelines developed in the first phase framed the searching and screening phase of the review process. Each of the national experts searched national databases (SWEPUB, DIVA, ORIA, SKEMMAN, FINNA). Further, as a quality assurance, we compared and supplemented the findings with already existing relevant national research reviews (e.g. Buland & Mathiesen, 2008; National Audit Office, 2015; Skovhus & Thomsen, 2017; Vilhjálmsdóttir, 2016). In this process, we agreed to encompass research that contained explicit paragraphs with implications for educational and vocational guidance – although not primarily focusing on guidance. Country representatives gathered their findings in a country note. Table 1 visualises the distribution of findings in the initial screening process.

	Sweden	*Finland*	*Norway*	*Denmark*	*Iceland*	*Total*
Peer reviewed articles	16 (-)	22 (1)	5 (-)	3 (5)	37 (4)	83 (10)
PhD theses	18 (3)	51 (5)	4 (-)	3 (1)	2 (2)	52 (11)
Evaluative reports	3 (7)	4(2)	20 (17)	69 (22)	-(1)	92 (49)
Other (e.g. Anthologies)	21 (11)	1(-)	7 (-)	1 (9)	3 (-)	32 (20)
Total	58 (21)	73 (8)	36 (17)	76 (37)	42 (7)	**286 (90)**

Table 1: Distribution of research reports by theme and country. The numbers in brackets indicate numbers in the 2003 review (Plant, et al., 2003). Note of importance: the 2003 review contained selected examples**.**

Synthesis

The content of the national reports was analysed based on recommendations in systematic exploratory review methodology (Creswell, 2013). This involved systematization of the documented research based on thematic areas, stated intentions in the studies, and specific target groups. Further, we compared and further synthesised preliminary conclusions from all country notes into themes of current features. Given the amount of research reports, the following presentation of thematic features will emphasize representations of prominent research areas, more than act as an exhaustive list of all documented research revealed through the review process.

Features in Nordic research on educational and vocational guidance between 2003 and 2016

Regarding the distribution among the countries, the total amount of documented research varies from 36 (Norway) to 76 (Denmark). Sweden and Finland have a larger amount of PhD theses (18/51) than the other countries (4/3/2), while Iceland stands out as the most prominent provider of peer-reviewed articles (37). Regarding evaluative reports, Denmark has over three times more reported projects in this category than the next (Norway).

The analysis of the research reports revealed the following thematic areas: focus on the outcome of educational and vocational guidance; with the subcategories outcome of educational and vocational guidance in a school context, focus on outcome of educational and vocational guidance for adults, outcome of educational and vocational guidance related to different target groups. Further, we revealed a theme called the guidance process, with the subcategories educational and vocational guidance in groups and communities, ICT-oriented/Multi channelled approaches, contextualisation of international inventories and professionalization of the guidance practitioners. The third thematic area is critical approaches. Table 2 show the distribution among the different themes included in this review.

Theme 1: Focus on the outcome of educational and vocational guidance (63)	**Theme 2: The guidance process (24)**	**Theme 3: Critical approaches (9)**
Sub categories	**Sub categories**	
outcome of educational and vocational guidance in a school context (24)	educational and vocational guidance in groups and communities (7)	
outcome of educational and vocational guidance for adults (19)	ICT-oriented/Multi channelled approaches (6)	
outcome of educational and vocational guidance related to different target groups (20)	contextualisation of international inventories (7)	
	professionalization of the guidance practitioners (4)	

Table 2: Distribution of different themes. The numbers in brackets indicate the number of texts associated with the theme

Theme 1: Focus on the outcome of educational and vocational guidance

The main area of research we find in this review is concerned with the potential outcome of educational and vocational guidance. This correlates with the findings reported in the prior review (Plant et al., 2003). We begin with examples from a school context, which contains the largest amount of research in this category.

Outcome of educational and vocational guidance in a school context

A common feature in all Nordic research related to the outcomes of guidance in a school context is an emphasis on young peoples' transitional phases, and how guidance could or should be delivered to contribute in these processes (e.g. Buland, Mathiesen, & Mordal, 2014; Day, Kaiser & Nielsen, 2009; Hultgren, 2009; Katznelson & Pless, 2005; Lund, 2006; Pless & Katznelson, 2007). In more detail, the focus has been on measurement of outcomes in career learning programmes (e.g. Lødding & Holen, 2012), and school-based guidance provision

(e.g. Buland, & Havn, 2003; Buland & Mathiesen, 2008; Buland, Mathiesen, Aaslid, Haugsbakken & Bungum, 2010; Buland et al., 2011). A common feature in these studies is to present an overall picture of the development and quality of guidance in Nordic schools. Mainly, studies are financed through national or regional governments, and aimed at evaluating already initiated national or regional projects (e.g. Atjonen, Manninen, Mäkinen & Vanhalakka-Ruoho, 2011; Christensen & Larsen, 2011; Danish Evaluation Institute, 2007; Epinion, Pluss Leadership & the Danish Centre for Youth Research, 2012; Rambøll, 2005a; 2005b; 2006a; 2006b; 2007). The methodological design is often triangulation, with a combination of observation, surveys and interviews.

Recent research in a Danish school context also includes an emphasis of the usefulness of introducing Career Management Skills concepts (e.g. Juul, Pless & Katznelson, 2016; Katznelson, Lundby & Møller Hansen, 2016; Poulsen, Thomsen, Buhl & Hagmayer, 2016). In Iceland, Vilhjálmssdóttir (2007) compared in an evaluative study two different approaches in career education – an experiential approach and a cognitive approach. In Finland, Tapio (2010) focused on the effects of a group counselling and classroom guidance model with an aim of helping students improve their achievement strategies.

Focus on outcome of educational and vocational guidance for adults

The research in this category is mainly focusing on (1) evaluating different methodological approaches in guidance (e.g. Vanhalakka-Ruoho & Ruponen, 2013), (2) guidance services in regards to career related issues occurring in organisational changes (e.g. Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2015; Hallqvist, 2012), and (3) organisational developments in service provision (e.g. Vilhjálmsdóttir et al., 2011). The research in this last area covered in particular evaluations of the establishment of regional partnerships for career guidance (e.g. Becken, Klingenberg, Berg & Jordell, 2014; Bergem, Grimsrud & Halvorsen, 2015; Borgen, Røste & Vibe, 2008; Buland & Haugsbakken, 2009; Feiring & Helgesen, 2007, Mathisen & Stokke, 2011; Nyhus, Solbu & Stokke, 2011; Stokke & Nyhus, 2010).

Beside the three main areas mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, there is research undertaken to study the career development and implications for practice in a university context (Lairio, Puukari & Kouvo, 2011; Svennungsen, 2011). Another segment relates to the outcome of guidance in different rehabilitation and public employment settings (Pasanen, 2007; Reme, et al., 2016; Sveinsdottir, et al., 2014). The research methodology in this thematic category varies from qualitative studies – typically with the intention of investigating the experience of users (e.g. Svennungsen, 2011) – to quantitative approaches, e.g. multicentre Randomized Controlled Trials (Reme, et al., 2016).

Outcome of educational and vocational guidance related to different target groups

In all Nordic countries, there is a focus of interest in research on target-specific approaches of educational and vocational guidance (e.g. Hertzberg, 2003; Larsen, Day, Boysen & Hansen, 2008; Lindblad, 2016; Lundqvist, 2010; Sheikhi, 2013; Sundelin, 2015). Although present in all countries, (e.g. Juutilainen, 2003; Mathiesen, Buland & Bungum, 2010; Sørensen, Sørensen, Plant & Wolthers, 2007; Sørensen, Madsen & Sørensen, 2006; Zuleta & Krohn, 2013), Sweden stands out with a special focus on migrants (e.g. Lindblad, 2016; Lundqvist,

2010; Sheikhi, 2013; Sundelin, 2015), gender (e.g. Sandell, 2007) and social class (Lidström, 2009; Lidström et al., 2014; Lund, 2006; Puaca, 2013; Ulfsdotter, 2006).

Another targeted group of interest is dropouts from upper secondary education (e.g. Blöndal, Jónasson & Tannhäuser, 2011). Longitudinal research on dropout in relation to parenting (Blöndal & Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2009; 2014), student engagement and expected educational pathways based on level of student engagement (Blöndal & Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2012) have aimed at providing insights for policymakers and guidance practitioners who work as supportive agents for adolescents. Finally, we find an interest in the career development among students with special needs (e.g. Honkanen, 2006).

Theme 2: The guidance process

We name the second theme the guidance process. In the following paragraph, we will highlight research aimed at investigating educational and vocational guidance in groups and communities, ICT-oriented/Multi channelled approaches, contextualisation of international inventories and professionalization of the guidance practitioners.

Educational and vocational guidance in groups and communities

Evident in the other Nordic countries (e.g. Tapio, 2010; Vanhalakka-Ruoho & Ruponen, 2013) but specifically emphasized in Denmark, we see an interest in research on collective forms of guidance (e.g. Thomsen, 2009; Valgren, 2013). This change has been characterised as a collective turn in the view of how guidance ought to be delivered (Plant & Thomsen, 2012). As an example, Valgren (2013) tested and further developed a method called Collective Narrative Practice via case studies in three Danish folk high schools[1] (*folkehøjskole*). Thomsen (e.g. 2009; 2011; 2012) put a specific emphasis on studying what effect the process of moving guidance out of offices and into workplaces and actual working groups has. In Finland, Koivuluhta and Puhakka (2013) did a case study on a dialogical approach applied in group counselling. Vuori and Silvonen (2005) examined whether a preventive, group-based job search program has long-term beneficial effects on the re-employment and mental health of participants who have been unemployed for a prolonged period of time. Kettunen, Sampson and Vuorinen (2015) focused on guidance that has expanded into online communities.

ICT-oriented/Multi channelled approaches

The use of technology in career development systems and services has increased dramatically in recent years. In light of the increase, research studies of the concept of ICT as an integrative part of educational and vocational guidance, as well as the attitudes among practitioners to this potential change of structure of guidance provision, have been completed in the Nordic countries. In the review, it is evident that Finland, and especially a research team at the University of Jyväskylä, has taken a lead in focusing on these matters.

Bimrose, Kettunen & Goddard (2015) use an international lens to examine some key elements that contribute to the successful integration of ICT into career practice, while Vuorinen & Kettunen (2012) and Vuorinen,

[1] Folkehøjskoler are living examples of the enlightenment movement: they provide open adult education in residential settings

Sampson & Kettunen (2011) present issues for critical implementation of ICT in the training programmes for career professionals. Vuorinen (2006) examined the perceptions of career practitioners on their use of internet in guidance. Furthermore, Kettunen, Sampson and Vuorinen (2015) have examined the career practitioners´ conceptions of competency for social media in career services. The results of this study have been successfully applied to curriculum development in the international summer course for ICT in guidance and counselling in Finland. In a recent study, Kettunen, Vuorinen and Ruusuvirta, (2016), examined the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network representatives´ conceptions of the role of information and communication technologies related to national guidance policies.

Contextualisation of international inventories

In Iceland, there seems to be a persistent focus on research seeking to test the applicability of internationally developed inventories for the measurement of vocational interest and career adaptability. Although evident in some research in the other countries (e.g. Dybwad, 2008), this seems to be an Icelandic phenomenon among the Nordic countries. In 2009, Icelandic researchers joined an international team in producing a psychometric scale to measure career adaptability. Vilhjálmssdóttir, Kjartansdóttir, Smáradóttir and Einarsdóttir (2012) examined the psychometric characteristics and construct validity of the Icelandic version (CAAS-Iceland). Other findings have suggested that a gender-type dimension may be influencing the responses of men and women to the items in the Strong Interest Inventory (Einarsdóttir, 2005; Einarsdóttir & Rounds, 2009). Further, an emic approach was used to develop a set of Icelandic indigenous basic interest scales (Einarsdóttir, Eyjólfsdóttir & Rounds, 2013). In 2010 (Einarsdóttir, Rounds, & Su), the use of Holland's RIASEC model in Iceland was revisited. Testing for applicability, an Icelandic translation of the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI) was administered to university students and career counselling clients (Björnsdóttir, Einarsdóttir & Kárdal 2008; Björnsdóttir, Kárdal & Einarsdóttir, 2010).

Professionalization of the guidance practitioners

In the guidance process category, we also find research on different areas concerned with the professionalization of guidance practitioners. Koskela (2013) aimed at developing the counselling and guidance skills and interdisciplinary teamwork inside an organization. With the emerging expansions in the view of the guidance process as a backdrop, Onnismaa (2003) examined the changes in guidance and counselling professionalism. Nielsen, Skovhus and Buhl (2011) examined the personal and organizational effect of participating in a guidance diploma education in Denmark, while Nummenmaa, Sinisalo, & Vanhalakka-Ruoho (2008) examined two decades of Master Degree programmes in guidance and counselling in Finland. In addition, Kupiainen (2009) focuses on the changes in guidance thinking of career counsellors by analysing their experiences and their account of their work, and Nykänen, Saukkonen, & Vuorinen (2012) examined the transformation of guidance provision.

Theme 3: Critical approaches

In the third theme, we include studies who investigate, problematize and question the direction of the ongoing development of educational and vocational guidance in the Nordic countries.

Bengtsson (2011; 2015a; 2015b; 2016) has contributed with insight on this complex and dynamic inter-relationship concerning the governance of guidance. The overall aim of these studies is to enquire into and problematize the governance of career guidance, and how individuals' career management is constructed within EU policy. The Foucauldian governmentality perspective and the analytic method of problematization is utilized.

Another example is Kjærgård (2012), who in his work intends to show how career guidance is expressed as a regulating mechanism between the needs of society and the freedom of the individual to choose education and employment in a Norwegian context. As Bengtsson, he also draws inspiration from Foucault's discourse analytics and power analytics.

Bergmo-Prvulovic (2012; 2013; 2014; 2015) focuses on a conceptual and critical approach in her study of social representations of career and career guidance in the changing world of working life. Her focus is on exploration of the meaning of career as a phenomenon and its implication for career guidance.

Discussion

Our analysis revealed three main themes. Among them, the potential outcome of educational and vocational guidance in different sectors and for different user groups stands out as the most prominent research area. Our interpretation is that this relates to an increased focus at a European level for a solid evidence base regarding the outcomes of educational and vocational guidance in the period this review has investigated (Haug & Plant, 2016). In our opinion, the review show that the research undertaken in this concerns, is mainly done by evaluative research studies with an intention to describe and analyse either (a) the effect of new legislations, or (b) the applicability of different organisational, procedural and methodological approaches. Haug & Plant (2016) reflects in their article on researchers' potential contribution to evidence-based practice and policy making in educational and vocational guidance. They argue for a broad and pluralistic research strategy to meet the complexity of possible questions in need of answers to provide evidence in educational and vocational guidance. In our opinion, the review of Nordic research on educational and vocational guidance provide an insight into different levels and dimensions of educational and vocational guidance in a Nordic context. Seen through a systemic lens (Patton & McMahon, 2014), the research findings range from seeing guidance from an intrapersonal (e.g. Björnsdóttir, Einarsdóttir & Kárdal 2008) to a global perspective (Saukkonen & Parkkinen, 2011). Further, it covers both intra-organizational issues, e.g. management (Jensen, 2012), and topics related to inter-organizational issues, e.g. different cooperative efforts (e.g. Thomsen & Jensen, 2011; Lunden, Hansen, Johansen & Frederiksen, 2011). Thirdly, the research is undertaken from both rural and urban areas of the Nordic countries (e.g. Lidström, 2009). Methodologically, we find examples from a multitude of approaches, ranging from Randomized Controlled Trials (Sveinsdottir et al., 2014) to biographical narrative approaches (Lidström, 2009). Further, we find an emerging interest in a phenomenographic approach (e.g. Kettunen, Vuorinen, & Ruusuvirta, 2016), which is quite new in guidance research.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to provide insight to research-based knowledge grounded in the Nordic context in a given time period. The review indicate that there is a rich source of research undertaken on many different areas and topics in the community of educational and vocational guidance researchers in the Nordic countries.

Although optimistic on behalf of the potential utilization of the research revealed in this review, we urge an awareness of how an overweight on governmentally financed research can affect the designs and findings of research. In this scenario, there is a possibility of research being the role as confirmative support of the appropriateness of proposed legislation rather than taking a more active role as a driver in the development of new policies and practices. As Hooley (2014) propose concerning the role of evidence in the quality development of educational and vocational guidance, there is a need for a continuously focus on both addressing the question whether we are doing things right, but also whether we are doing the right things.

In this concluding section, we also want to highlight some potential limitations in this review. In our opinion, the most prominent limitation is concerned with the ability to compare research done in different context and documented in different languages. In the introduction, we argued that there is both similarities and differences among the Nordic countries in regards to cultural, political, and geographical features. We are aware that the concepts used to describe what we in this article call educational and vocational guidance differ among the countries. Whether we have understood the nuances and underlying meaning in the research reviewed is therefore a potential limitation. This limitation brings us to a final recommendation for further research. In doing this review, there has been interesting discussions on the meaning of different concepts used to conceptualize educational and vocational guidance among the members of the research group. We have also revealed that there is very little cross-Nordic comparative research undertaken. Given this situation, our recommendation is that there should be taken initiatives for more cross-Nordic research in the future. The review has revealed several similar research interests in the different countries, and in future research we think a comparative dimension could strengthen the impact of the research.

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