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Work Experience Placements in Lower Secondary Education in Nordic Countries

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to describe and analyse work experience placements in lower secondary education in Nordic countries. The article focuses on how and to what extent work experience placements in career education is formalised across the Nordic countries. It identifies similarities and differences among the countries and will provide a comparison of the key characteristics relating to work experience placement in lower secondary education in Nordic countries. The analysis is based on policy documents, curriculum and research concerning work experience placements in lower secondary schools in the respective countries. The comparison reveals that while there are some similarities there are also significant differences among the countries regarding the national guidelines, curriculum and general aim of the work experience placement in lower secondary education. The results show that further studies are needed to acquire more knowledge relating to work experience placements in Nordic countries.

ABSTRAKTI

Tämän artikkelin tarkoituksena on kuvata ja analysoida perusopetuksen työelämään tutustumisjaksoja Pohjoismaissa. Artikkelin keskittyy siihen, miten ja missä määrin perusopetuksen työelämään tutustumisjaksot on formalisoitu eri Pohjoismaissa. Artikkelissa tarkastellaan työelämään tutustumisjaksoihin sekä niiden järjestämiseen liittyviä yhteneväisyyksiä ja eroja. Tulokset osoittavat, että vaikka maiden välillä on joitakin yhtäläisyyksiä, niiden välillä on myös merkittäviä eroja kansallisten linjausten, opetussuunnitelmien ja yleisten tavoitteiden osalta. Lisää tutkimuksia työelämään tutustumisjaksojen osalta tarvitaan pohjoismaissa.

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In Nordic countries, there is a strong tradition of career guidance, with an increasing focus on what young citizens gain from career guidance and career education (e.g. Haug et al., 2020; Kettunen, 2021; Plant, 2003, Vuorinen et al., 2021). As a systematic attempt to support students' career development through a range of educational strategies, career education provides occupational information and incorporates career-related concepts into the academic curriculum, along with various worksite-based experiences and courses in career planning (Niles & Harris-Bowlsby, 2017). PISA analyses of career development items (Sweet et al., 2014) indicate that the Nordic countries are forerunners in the development of career education activities that are valued by young citizens.

In this context, there has been a renewed international interest in how schools support students in learning and preparation for work and working life (e.g. Mann et al., 2020a, 2020b). One of the ways in which lower secondary education in the Nordic countries provides for students to learn about world of work is through *work experience placements* (WEP). In the present article, this term refers to 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. WEPs are one important way enabling young people to formulate and test ideas about their future, learn about different roles in work and how organisations function whilst also developing relevant practical skills and knowledge. These placements are an important element in career guidance and career education activities that young people should engage in as they progress through school and beyond (e.g. Mann et al., 2020a, 2020b; Messer, 2018; Millard et al., 2019; Miller et al., 1991). Throughout life, such experiences help to develop career decision-making skills and career adaptability (Borbely-Pecze & Hutchinson, 2014).

Previous studies have investigated various aspects of young people's workplace experiences (e.g. Buzzeeo & Cifci, 2017; Huddleston, 2000; Hughes et al., 2016; Mann, 2012; Miller et al., 1991; Watts, 1983, 1991, 1996) and the implementation of work experience programmes in lower secondary education (e.g. Huddleston & Oh, 2004; Miller et al., 1991; Watts, 1983, 1991). Huddleston and Oh (2004) identified three distinct approaches to providing students with workplace experiences: learning *about* work (to understand how private and public sector organisations function); learning *for* work (by developing skills to enhance employability and ease the school-to-work transitions) and learning *through* work (using work as a context for learning). Watts (1991) noted that the nature and the quality of the learning derived from experience of work depends heavily on how these experiences are integrated into the broader learning programme and on the supporting work done before and after the experience itself. Part of the power of experience-based learning about work is that the experience is ultimately owned by the student and is largely managed by the employer rather than by teachers or career practitioners. This active involvement of students and employers in determining the nature of experience-based learning makes it an especially fruitful approach to career education (Watts, 1991). Collaboration between workplaces, teachers and career counsellors is emphasised for career learning potentials to be unleashed through WEP (e.g. Andrews & Hooley, 2018; Holman, 2014; Kettunen et al., 2020, 2023; Rosvall, 2020).

There is evidence to suggest that WEPs enhance students' understanding of job requirements (knowledge of work) and of their own potential in terms of market requirements (knowledge of themselves) (e.g. Buzzeeo & Cifci, 2017; Hirasawa & Sundelin, 2003; Lundahl et al., 2020). In addition, WEP participation contributes to the development of general employability skills and motivation to do well in school and can have a positive effect on decision-making competencies and clarify educational choices (e.g. Buland & Havn, 2000; Buzzeeo & Cifci, 2017; Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019; Vilhjálmsdóttir, 2010; Watts, 1996). There is also evidence that WEPs can enhance school results, educational motivation, education choices, career aspirations and general employability skills (e.g. Buland & Havn, 2000; Buzzeeo & Cifci, 2017; Mann, 2012; Mann et al., 2020a; Watts, 1996). On the other hand, WEPs may reproduce unwelcome patterns in terms of class, ethnicity and gender (Hatcher & Gallais, 2008; Mann & Dawkins, 2014) unless all students are afforded multiple experiences of diverse workplaces. As a related issue, the framing of preparation time and subsequent processing of WEP experiences may determine whether the students are encouraged to adapt to the current state of the labour market or to promote critical thinking to pursue new opportunities and directions (e.g. Shilling, 1987; Røise, 2022; Watts, 1991, 1996).

Studies on WEPs in lower secondary education in Nordic countries are rare and there is apparent research gap that this study aims to narrow. The main aim of this study is to compare how and to what extent WEP in career education is formalised across the Nordic countries. The aim is twofold. First, we aim to provide a picture of work experience placements pertaining to career education in each country. Second, we provide an overview of Nordic countries as a whole and identify similarities and differences among the countries. More specifically, we aim to answer to the following question: (1) What are the similarities and differences in organisation of WEP in lower secondary education in Nordic countries? The main purposes of this comparison is to enhance our understanding of organisation of WEP across the Nordic and provide basis for the discussion and development.

The career education curriculum can be described in terms of various dimensions. According to Goodlad's (1979) theory of curriculum inquiry, the term *curriculum* extends beyond what happens within the school walls to encompass other forms of planned and unplanned experience and learning. Goodlad identifies five such dimensions: curriculum as political/ideological, as formalised in policy documents, as perceived by teachers (or counsellors), as operationalised through teaching and as experienced by students. While Goodlad (1979) advocates investigation of all five dimensions, the present article focuses on how and to what extent WEP in career education is formalised across the Nordic countries.

METHODS

To examine the curriculum as a formalised text document (Goodlad, 1979), the present study drew on text analysis and content analysis (cf. Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). This work was inspired by collective policy ethnography (cf. Beach et al., 2019) which involves three steps, an initial preparation phase, in which we defined and conceptualised WEP and selected relevant policy documents, curricula and WEP research as units of analysis. As a second step in that preparation phase, each national team gathered and summarised country-specific data, translating where necessary. As a third step in that initial phase, the researchers read the summaries and reviewed the data to ensure clarity.

The next phase (organising), which included coding and categorising was done alongside with testing different theoretical concepts in order to discuss the data. We found the concepts *classification* and *framing* (Bernstein, 2000) useful for discussing the content and organisation of WEPs. Thus, content and organisation were coded and categorised towards classification and framing (see Table 1). Classification refers to the insularity of content or knowledge; that is, A can only be A if it can effectively insulate itself from B. In addition, Bernstein (2000) distinguishes between *strong* and *weak* classification (i.e. whether A can be strongly or weakly classified in relation to B). In the present context, we considered classification to be a useful concept for discussing how strongly or weakly WEP is insulated from other school activities, with or without its own goals or descriptions. On the other hand, framing refers to sequencing, pacing and control. Texts and tables were tested towards relevance of concepts and comparable units containing cross-national patterns and differences. For present purposes, we translated framing as WEP duration, introduction, and evaluation, including responsibility to find a work experience placement (see Table 1).

FINDINGS

Focusing on relevant policy documents, curricula and WEP research for lower secondary education, our comparative analysis identified various similarities and differences across the Nordic countries. We organise our findings under three sections, the first two of which provide an overview of career education pertaining to WEP and WEP organisation for each country. In the third section, similarities and differences in organisation of work experience placements in lower secondary education among the countries are explored.

CAREER EDUCATION IN LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL

In **Denmark**, career guidance is seen as a continuous process within the education system to help young people to become more aware of their abilities, interests and possibilities, enabling them to make qualified education and employment decisions (Undervisningsministeriet, 2022).

Table 1 Comparison of WEP organisation in lower secondary education in Nordic countries.

	DENMARK	GREENLAND	FINLAND	ICELAND	NORWAY	SWEDEN
Career education	Compulsory topic; integrated in the compulsory subjects	Compulsory topic; integrated in other compulsory subjects	Compulsory, timetabled subject	Vaguely mentioned, topic integrated in other compulsory subjects	Compulsory, timetabled subject	Compulsory, integrated in other compulsory subjects
WEP	Optional	Optional	Mandatory	Not stated	Optional	Mandatory
WEP in curriculum	Mentioned	Not stated	Described in detail	Not stated	Not stated	Mentioned
Purpose of WEP	Not stated	Not stated	To create a foundation for educational and career choices and to increase appreciation for working life in general, develop job search skills	Not stated	Not stated	Help students to gain knowledge about working life prior to future study and career choices
Duration of WEP	One optional week in grades 7 to 10	Not stated	One to three days in grade 7 Five days in grade 8 Five to ten days in grade 9	Not stated	Not stated	At least ten days in total for all students from grade 8 in compulsory school
Assessment of WEP	Not specified	Not specified	Workplace and student self-assessment	Not specified	Not specified	Not specified
Responsibility for finding WEP	Student and parents	Not specified	Students supported by study counsellors	Not specified	Not specified	Municipality or school
Employers' role	Not specified	Not specified	Partners	Not specified	Not specified	Not specified

In Denmark's lower secondary schools, career education falls within the topic of 'Education and Work' ('Uddannelse og job' in Danish) (Undervisningsministeriet, 2023, §7). This compulsory topic is integrated into all compulsory school subjects at every grade. There is no specified individual timetable, and the extent of teaching is not regulated. The Education and Work curriculum is divided into three themes: *personal choice, from education to work* and *working life*. Competence, skills and knowledge targets are specified for these themes, and it is up to the school principal to decide which subjects will incorporate the compulsory themes. The syllabus describes the topic's progression through different levels (Ministry for children, education and gender equality, 2018). Students in grades 7 to 9 can choose an elective subject called 'Knowledge of work,' but it's not mandatory for schools to provide this option (Undervisningsministeriet, 2023, §9). Students in grades 6 to 9 have the right to participate in WEP. Schools have the option to offer organised WEP, but are not obliged to do so. No specific competencies are required for teaching the topic of Education and Work, but new proposals for teacher education in Denmark allow students in training to choose an elective subject related to the topic if they wish (Uddannelses- og forskningsministeriet, 2022).

The legislation states that Education and Work activities should be planned in cooperation with the municipal youth guidance units ('Den kommunale ungeindsats' in Danish) (Undervisningsministeriet, 2023, §7); these employ full-time career counsellors, who must hold legally defined qualifications. Building on the knowledge and skills that students acquire in Education and Work, career guidance should help them to make informed and qualified choices that facilitate the transition from compulsory lower secondary education to vocational or general upper secondary education or to full-time work (Undervisningsministeriet, 2022, §6).

In **Greenland**, the Compulsory School Act (Grønlands hjemmestyre, 2003) describes the subject 'Personal Development' for grades 1 to 10. One of the subject's purposes is to support students to understand the significance of their education, career and lifestyle choices for themselves and for society. Teachers must also help students to develop tolerance towards others and value everyone's role and contribution to a democratic society (Grønlands hjemmestyre, 2003, §34). As part of the Personal Development, the theme 'Education and Profession' requires students in grades 8 to 10 to familiarise with at least one profession of their choice and to evaluate its potential benefits and their future interest (Grønlands hjemmestyre, 2003, §34–37). School can offer WEP but participation is not mandatory. All students are entitled to educational and vocational guidance (grades 4 to 10 in the capital Nuuk and grades 6 to 10 in other municipalities).

In **Finland**, the Basic Education Act (628/1998, § 11) entitles every student to adequate career guidance services (§ 30). The national core curriculum promotes a 'whole school' approach to career education which means that all staff members share responsibility for career education. Career education is both a transversal theme in all subjects and a compulsory element of the curriculum, comprising 76 hours of scheduled activities for lower secondary students in grades 7 to 9. In addition, students are entitled to receive individual guidance, group counselling and a practical introduction to working life (TET/PRAO) that includes personal experiences as a foundation for educational and career choices and a better general appreciation of working life. TET/PRAO is implemented in cooperation with other school subjects, building on their content and working methods (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016).

Comprehensive school education providers have a duty to ensure that students receive individual guidance and counselling in grades 8 and 9 of compulsory school to prepare them for the next phase of their studies. Students with challenges in career planning, planning for further studies and/or entering to upper secondary level are entitled for more targeted and intensive guidance counselling (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020). Once students have completed their comprehensive education, those providers remain responsible for guiding and supervising compulsory education until students move on to their next phase of education and begin their studies.

The Finnish National Agency for Education specifies the core curriculum for comprehensive education (2016), which sets key learning objectives that include career education. Local education providers are required to implement an institutional curriculum, that incorporates provisions for cooperation with the local labour market and business community. Classroom visits by labour market representatives, workplace visits, project work, WEPs and the information about different sectors are central parts of this cooperation. Subjects must include modules

that link subject knowledge and skills to the demands and possibilities of working life. Beyond choices related to the next level of study, emphasis is placed on promoting acquisition of lifelong career management skills as a transversal learning objective and competence area. In general, guidance services and career education are provided and co-ordinated by full-time school counsellors, who are employed by the school and must hold legally defined qualifications. These counsellors are responsible for timetabled career education sessions, group activities, individual guidance and cooperation with parents, employers and other stakeholders. School counsellors work with group tutors who support their students on daily activities. The task of all teachers is to guide students in studies in the subjects they teach and to help them to develop their learning-to-learn skills and capabilities for learning. Although career education is afforded the same legal status as other curriculum subjects, it is not graded. Instead, formative evaluation is based on self-assessment, interactions and feedback related to different guidance activities.

In **Iceland**, the national guidelines for career education are set out in the Compulsory School Act (Lög um grundskóla 91/2008). Career education is first mentioned in article 24: “The National Curriculum Guide should include an emphasis on educational and vocational guidance (education) and the presentation of different occupations and study programmes as an aid in the choice of future studies and employment” (p. 9). Although all students have the right to receive career counselling from an appropriate specialist during compulsory schooling (Lög um grunnskóla, nr. 91/2008; Lög um náms- og starfsráðgjafa no.35/2009), career education is not defined as a separate subject, and no hours are allocated to it in the general timetable (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). There is no national curriculum for career education and no written statement regarding the nature of work experience, meaning that WEP is not mandatory. Administrators and educational institutions must operate without clear public policy or institutional goals for career counselling (Menntamálaráðuneyti, 2007, 2008; Vilhjálmssdóttir, 2016). Nevertheless, during compulsory schooling, teachers of natural and social science subjects must ‘discuss how different competences are useful in modern occupations and identify occupations that require specialised knowledge’ (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014, p.174). Similarly, for teachers of crafts and innovation, ‘The main objectives ... are to enable pupils to work independently, promote job satisfaction and respect for work and develop concentration, diligence and work skills’ (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014, p. 159).

In **Norway**, career education is organised as a compulsory subject with its own curriculum. This involves 110 hours of education over the three years of obligatory lower secondary schooling (grades 8 to 10). Known as ‘Educational Choice’ (‘Utdanningsvalg’ in Norwegian), the name of the compulsory subject emphasises the singular choice of an educational trajectory rather than a broader focus on career learning. In order to teach the subject of Educational Choice, no subject specific competencies are required. School counsellors, often in part-time positions, either teach or cooperate with teachers who teach the subject. The subject is graded by participation.

Since its introduction in 2008, the subject has focused strongly on the transition from lower to upper secondary school (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2008). A second revision of the curriculum focused more on the world of work as a context for student exploration (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2015). The latest version (introduced in 2020) is less immediately work-focused, but knowledge about working life through testing and exploration is still described as a competence goal (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020). This curriculum is linked to an interdisciplinary public health and life skills across the whole school curriculum. As a statement of general values and principles for primary and secondary education, the core curriculum emphasises the value of cooperation between school and working life (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, p.18). School can offer WEP but it is not mandatory.

Sweden conforms to a ‘whole school’ approach to career education which means that all staff members share responsibility for career education. While the legislation does not stipulate the extent of teaching or number of lessons, it states that students should have access to a qualified career guidance counsellor. Formulated in general terms, the curriculum specifies that ‘The school is responsible for ensuring that each pupil on completing compulsory school can make well-informed choices regarding further education and vocational orientation’ (Lgr22, 2022, p. 14).

In its general recommendations, the National Agency for Education provides a more detailed description of how the work of career guidance should be conducted (Skolverket, 2013). To fulfil the goal of meeting students' needs for educational and vocational guidance, the recommendations identify three forms of intervention: career interviews, teaching and information provision. While the first is the sole responsibility of counsellors, teaching and information responsibilities are shared by counsellors and teachers. In particular, teachers have a responsibility 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'. Similarly, career guidance counsellors or staff members who perform 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, 2022, p. 17). A new act implemented in July 2018 makes it mandatory for schools to promote a practical working life orientation (Prao), reinstating this provision following it in 1994 (Regeringskansliet, 2017).

WORK EXPERIENCE PLACEMENTS IN LOWER SECONDARY SCHOOL

In **Denmark**, schools have the option to provide WEP for student in grades 6 to 10. If a school doesn't organise WEPs, students still have the right to arrange their own one-week WEP in grades 8 and 9 if they and their parents decide. This right is outlined in the educational guidelines (Undervisningsministeriet 2023, §9). For grade 10 students, WEP with an educational focus is also a right, but it's not compulsory for either the school or the municipal youth guidance unit to offer it (Undervisningsministeriet, 2023, §6).

The topic 'Education and Work' should be integrated in the various compulsory subjects at all grades (Undervisningsministeriet, 2023, §7). WEP is mentioned as one of the possible activities in the topic's curriculum (Undervisningsministeriet, 2018). In such cases the WEP must be organised in collaboration with the teachers and the school leader. In grades 7 to 10, WEPs run by municipal youth guidance units can also be offered at the school as an element of career guidance activities (Undervisningsministeriet, 2022). In practice, whether and how WEPs are organised varies from school to school (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2021, p. 14). In 2019, 62% of the students had participated in WEP either in 8th or 9th grade (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2019, p. 8). More than half of grade 8 students who had participated in a WEP reported that the placement had helped them to reflect on their educational and vocational interests and on their personal strengths. As well as discovering new job options and learning more about their educational choices, they said they had gained greater insight into the benefits of a vocational education (Louw, 2020).

Beyond general targets related to competence, skills and knowledge, legislation framing the Education and Work topic offers no further clarification of the purpose or learning aims of WEPs as a component of careers education and career guidance at the primary and lower secondary levels, and there is no curriculum or guidelines for workplace experience. The Agreement on strengthening practical expertise in compulsory school states that WEPs are intended to give students a sense of how a workplaces work, including the different work functions and educational backgrounds within a company (Regeringen, 2018).

In **Greenland**, WEP participation is not mandatory; it is up to the individual schools and guidance counsellors to decide whether to include WEPs as part of the subject 'Personal Development' and the theme 'Education and Profession' (Grønlands hjemmestyre, 2003). In practice, many students participate in WEPs in grades 8 and 9, but not in grade 10, which is their last year of compulsory school.

In **Finland**, a WEP called 'Introduction to Working Life' (TET) is a compulsory student entitlement defined in the national core curricula for all students aged 13–16 years (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). These are organised to support students' educational and occupational choices. During the WEP, students obtain knowledge about working life, the links between different fields of education and industry, requisite qualifications and relevant study opportunities. They also develop a greater awareness of their own capacity to plan and make decisions about their own future. In grades 8 and 9, each student joins a local company or

organisation for a week to gain personal experience of working life and the professions. At the beginning of the school year, a detailed schedule for WEP periods is jointly prepared by schools in the region to ensure that employers receive a reasonable number of students inquiries at a given time.

Students are informed about the ‘job offerings’ and are encouraged to contact potential employers directly for more details about likely responsibilities, enabling them to apply for those that interests them. Each student makes that decision independently and signs a contract with both the school and the company. Students are not paid for their work, but they are usually entitled to one free meal per day. Before entering the working environment, students develop a plan with their school counsellor. At the end of the WEP, students can share their experiences using a common reference structure that facilitates comparison, knowledge exchange and mutual learning. This material can be shared with their school counsellor and/or among their peer students. In addition, students can use this common reference point to reflect upon their own values, interests, skills and future aspirations. According to the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (Goman et al., 2020), 80 % of the students who had participated in the WEP in 2019 reported that the experience improved their knowledge of the labour market, and 42% said it was useful in their career choices. WEPs have efficacy in changing students’ attitude domains of independence and flexibility toward future education and occupation (Friberg, 2020). Grade 9 student who had participated in a WEP (TAT & T-Media, 2020) reported that both the school and the employers did their part well and for them the WEP has been a positive experience. Students had learned about different roles in work and how organisations function whilst also developing relevant practical skills and knowledge, and 37% said it increased their interest to the sector (TAT & T-Media, 2020).

In **Iceland**, work experience activities are not mandatory but are nevertheless found in many schools. Rooted in the Nordic tradition of gaining work experience during lower secondary education, this approach has been common since the late 1990s. Although no statistics are available, students in grades 9 or 10 are typically offered an opportunity to visit a workplace of their own choice for 2–3 days. This practice has become a tradition in many schools, regardless of whether they have a career education programme (Vilhjálmssdóttir, 2020). These visits are mostly organised by students themselves, with the support of a career counsellor or supervising teachers.

In **Norway**, despite a strong praxis for offering WEP in lower secondary schools, these activities are not a mandatory element of career education. In the latest revision of the curriculum, competency goals include a provision that students must acquire knowledge about working life through experimentation and exploration, but there is no specification of where and how this is done (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020).

Career education includes a legal provision for career counselling in each lower secondary school, and students have the right to ‘necessary guidance’ about education, job opportunities and occupational choices (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2006). Regarding the right to necessary counselling, the Norwegian Education Act, §22–3, requires that: ‘[...] The school, as far as possible and appropriate, involves external partners to provide students with the best possible information and offers advice on career and educational choices. Relevant partners are, for example, the second level of education, local business, partnerships for career guidance and the home’ (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2006).

Although not mandatory, different opportunities are commonly provided for work experience as an element of career education in Norway, and visits to companies have been common practice for several decades (e.g. Birkemo, 1997; Haug, 2017). In general, students in grade 8 are afforded opportunities for job shadowing by following a parent or relative during their working day, enabling them to know more about themselves and about working life. In grade 9, students can choose a profession or a company they are interested in and follow someone for up to one week. During that week, they explore a vocational route that may be of interest to them and gain an insight into the culture of working life. This is followed up in grade 10 by visits to various upper secondary schools. This progression of activities throughout the school years assists students to gradually develop an awareness of the choices they will make after grade 10. Suggestion on how to work pedagogically with these activities is provided in literature or online.

For schools in Norway, activities involving cooperation with workplaces can be challenging to organise (e.g. Andreassen, 2011; Røise & Bjerkholt, 2020), as the logistics seem to conflict with regular subject-based schooling. In some cases, this issue has been resolved by organising and coordinating one-day work visits to local companies (e.g. Bergen kommune, n.d.).

In **Sweden**, ten days of WEP (Prao) is mandatory during the last two years of compulsory schooling (grades 8 and 9). The responsible authority of compulsory schools is responsible for arranging WEP. Responsible authority can be a municipality or private school. WEP must be arranged in the first place at a workplace and in the second place by the student participating in teaching in a vocational program in upper secondary school (SFS 2018:105). The purpose of WEP is to enable students to 'gain knowledge about working life before future study and career choices'. As well as gaining work-related insights and experience, students learn how specific industries work (Skolverket, 2022). The ten days of mandatory WEP cannot be replaced by activities such as job shadowing, study visits, company collaborations, labour market days and job fairs.

Although WEP is currently mandatory, the relevant law is quite new, with few regulations to indicate how it should be organised, and some new educational institutions (private school enterprises) lack the necessary experience. As a result, schools differ widely in terms of how they assign responsibility for organising WEP and how they implement it. In most cases, the responsible authority leaves this to the school's career guidance counsellor/s (Malm Lindberg & Herrström, 2016; Rosvall, 2020). In some municipalities, WEP is a special function assigned to a school or municipality administrator. How WEP is organised may also differ within municipalities; in Gothenburg, for example, career guidance and counselling are offered through a service centre. Both public and private schools can buy the service from the centre, while some schools choose to organise WEP themselves or in another way (Malm Lindberg & Herrström, 2016; Rosvall, 2020). While students and parents can help to secure placements, the school and/or municipality has the overall responsibility for the provision and distribution of placements.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN ORGANISATION OF WORK EXPERIENCE PLACEMENTS IN LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION IN NORDIC COUNTRIES

Analysis of the Nordic countries' policy documents, curriculum, and research concerning organisation of WEP in lower secondary education indicates that similarities as well as differences prevail. In all the education acts of the Nordic countries and self-governing areas career education and guidance are legally mandated but differences on realisation exists. In Denmark, Greenland and Sweden, career education or related topic is compulsory but integrated in other subjects. In Iceland career education is vaguely mentioned but somewhat integrated in some subjects while in Finland and Norway it is a timetabled subject in its own right.

All the Nordic countries emphasise work experience placement-related activities, but these differ in terms of how strongly or weakly they are framed. As can be seen from the comparisons in table 1, WEP is regulated or recommended and mandatory in Finland and Sweden but optional in other countries (Denmark, Greenland, Norway). Finland is the only Nordic country that describes WEP in greater detail in the curriculum. WEPs are vaguely mentioned in the curriculum for career education in Sweden and Denmark whereas lacking from curriculum in Greenland, Iceland and Norway. While WEP is clearly linked to career choice in Sweden, it serves a much broader purpose in Finland: to provide knowledge about labour market dynamics. Denmark do not specify the purpose of WEP although it is mentioned in curriculum. Denmark, Finland and Sweden respectively specify WEP duration of 1–2 weeks. In Norway, Iceland and Greenland the curriculum does not specify WEP or its duration. In Finland, WEPs are assessed by the workplace and self-assessed by the participating student; assessment provisions are not specified/instructed in any of the other Nordic countries. There are also differences in the allocation of responsibility for finding WEPs. In Denmark, this is the responsibility of the students and parents; in Sweden, the school or municipality is responsible. In Finland, students themselves seek the WEPs based on their interests, supported by study counsellors. Regarding employer's role, Finland alone describes them as 'partners'.

At European level, including the Nordic countries, there are several arguments to strengthen workplace learning for adolescents and young adults, for example it is argued (i) young people's time in education is getting longer and longer and thus they are introduced to working life later and work experience is seen as a possibility to enhance experience of working life (Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019; Buzzeeo & Cifci, 2017), (ii) working life is argued to be more turbulent and WEP is seen as a possibility to learn about new workplace conditions (WGCG, 2021), (iii) WEP is seen as a complement to school based learning since the latter does not facilitate the various informal forms of workplace learning (Kankaraš, 2022; Mann, 2012).

The main aim of this study was to compare how and to what extent WEP in career education is formalised across the Nordic countries. Our analysis confirms that all the included Nordic countries emphasise WEP-related activities for students. However, these activities are more or less strongly framed; for example, while WEP duration is regulated or recommended and therefore mandatory in some countries, it remains unspecified in others. In Denmark, Iceland and Norway, the school support for WEP are decided locally and/or depends on students' request. This may reflect a historical tradition of national policy-based governance; in this regard, Finland's education policy seems the least deregulated.

In addition to the variations in framing, there is also variation in classification, i.e. how WEP is described and what it is described to achieve (goals). A description is lacking for Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Greenland and it is quite vaguely described in the overall curriculum for career education in Sweden, while Finland has a more detailed description. As the nature and quality of the learning derived from WEP depends heavily on how these experiences are integrated into the broader learning programme (Watts, 1991), there is an urgent need to update curricula to incorporate the goals and descriptions of WEP. As WEP goals and descriptions are lacking in most Nordic countries, it is also difficult to evaluate goal achievement at the national level or across the countries.

Despite these difficulties, the present analysis provides new and important insights that will make it easier to recognise and discuss trends in policy, curriculum and research pertaining to WEP in the Nordic countries in the future. It would also be intriguing to empirically investigate the commonalities and differences in students' perceptions of WEP across these countries, despite differences in framing and classification of the activities. However, given that WEP was generally weakly framed and classified in most countries, it is important to recognize that comparing student responses could potentially shed more light on local governance variations rather than national distinctions, especially since research shows that career guidance activities differ locally (cf. Mathiesen & Gunnarsdottir 2021; Rosvall 2020). Nevertheless, it remains important to explore ways of supporting young people to adapt to both present and future possibilities in the ever-changing world of work.

In other words, our aim to compare how and to what extent WEP in career education is formalised across the Nordic countries shows variation in classification and framing, but it is with an exception for Finland an overweight of weak classification and framing of WEP. Thus, it is possible to analyse and interpret this in several ways, among other things the consequences for the students or how it might be that WEP in the Nordic countries is commonly weakly classified and framed even though at European and national levels being argued to be an important part of career education. If we put the consequences of students in the forefront, a weakly classified and framed WEP runs the risk to be unevenly distributed among students and introductions and follow ups at school and tasks during the WEP might risk to not reach its potential when there is a weak collective understanding of what the goals of WEP among teachers, career guidance counsellors and workplace mentors might be.

In trying to understand the prevalence of weak classification and framing of WEP in the Nordic countries, there are several arguments for its importance. This might reflect the historicity of career education as a relatively new discipline and practice, compared to other disciplines with longer history such as for example Psychology or Business Economics (cf. Bernstein 2000, p. 52). It might be argued that career education has existed for a long time as a more or less formalised practice, while on the other hand formalisation of the practice as in education for professional career guidance counsellors is relatively new. For example, the possibility to study to be a career guidance counsellor in Sweden has only been possible since 1993 (Skolverket 2008). Thus, the

general weak classification and framing of WEP might be associated with career education and associated professionalism rather than a formalised discipline or profession. However, it is important and might be repeated that since the nature and quality of the learning that derives from WEP depends heavily on how these experiences are integrated into the broader learning programme (Watts, 1991), there is an urgent need to update curricula to incorporate the goals and descriptions of WEP. To ensure well informed updates, it is important to formalise and structure the collection of experiences of WEP from practitioners and students, as well as conduct more research.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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