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Career Education in the Nordic Countries: A Comparison of National Legislation and Compulsory School Curricula

COLLECTION:
CAREER EDUCATION
IN THE NORDIC
COUNTRIES

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

All Nordic countries provide career education and guidance (CEG) as part of compulsory education. Although the educational systems share common contexts, features, and challenges, there are differences in how *career education* as a systematic strategy supporting career learning and development is implemented and accessed in each country. This study aims to map and compare career education in compulsory schools in Denmark, the Faroe Islands, Finland, Greenland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. In doing so, the aim is to spark further discussion, support development in practice, and identify themes for further research. The analysis focuses on macro-level input for career education and includes each nation's relevant legislation and curriculum, resulting in a broad comparison consisting of four general parts: 1. *National legislation*, 2. *National curriculum*, 3. *Organisation and roles*, and 4. *Quality and evaluation*. The comparison revealed that while each country guarantees students the right to career guidance by law and requires a certain level of professionalisation for implementation, national legislation on career education and related curricula differ widely. In all the Nordic countries, career counsellors play a role in supporting career learning alongside teachers, but in most cases neither group's role is well-defined. Quality processes are rarely in place, but ad hoc evaluations have been conducted. The study and the categories can be utilised to enhance discussion in policy and practice development and guide further research on career education. The comparison identifies leadership in career education as an important topic for future research.

ABSTRAKT

Samtliga nordiska länder erbjuder någon form av studie- och yrkesvägledning i den obligatoriska utbildningen. Utbildningssystemen i de nordiska länderna har liknande kontext, syfte och utmaning. Däremot finns skillnader i hur länderna genomför och implementerar studie- och yrkesvägledning som en systematisk strategi, för att stödja karriärlärande. Studiens syfte var att kartlägga och jämföra styrande dokument som rör studie- och yrkesvägledning för grundskolorna i Danmark, Färöarna, Finland, Grönland,

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Island, Norge och Sverige. Analysen genomfördes på makronivå med fokus på varje lands skollagstiftning och läroplan. Kartläggningen resulterade i följande fyra teman som blev utgångspunkt för jämförelsen: 1. Nationell lagstiftning, 2. Nationell läroplan, 3. Organisation och roller och 4. Kvalitet och utvärdering. Jämförelsen visade att samtliga länders lagstiftning garanterar eleverna rätt till studie- och yrkesvägledning och att det krävs en viss nivå av utbildning för utförandet av vägledningen. Trots likheterna skiljer sig lagstiftningarna och läroplanerna avsevärt åt vad gäller utformningen av studie- och yrkesvägledningen. När det gäller organisation och roller visade det sig att samarbetet mellan funktionen studie- och yrkesvägledare och läraren spelar roll för betydelse av studie- och yrkesvägledning. I de flesta länder saknas dock en tydlig rollbeskrivning för vad som ingår i uppdraget. Angående kvalitet och utvärdering genomförs visserligen utvärderingar i vissa länder, men inte på ett systematiskt sätt. Studiens resultat kan användas som utgångspunkt för en diskussion om studie- och yrkesvägledningens utveckling. Ett särskilt intressant fokus för framtida forskning är vilken roll ledarskapet spelar för studie- och yrkesvägledningen.

The Nordic countries – Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and the self-governing territories of the Faroe Islands and Greenland (which both have partial autonomy according to the Home Rule arrangement with Denmark and are hereafter referred to as countries) – share similar values in education. The region's schools are based in a common tradition of a democratic and free public school system emphasising social justice and equality (Blossing, 2013). These shared values are reflected in legislation guaranteeing career guidance and education (CEG). In all the Nordic countries, compulsory education students have a legal right to career guidance (e.g. Andreassen et al., 2019; Haug et al., 2020; Vuorinen et al., 2021). Career education is important in compulsory education because it provides opportunities for career learning and has positive developmental and social outcomes (e.g. Hughes et al., 2016). It is also a part of lifelong guidance systems, is accessible and cost-effective, and is therefore essential in meeting students' legal right to career guidance (ELGPN, 2015). National evaluations, however, indicate that most of the Nordic countries fall short in providing systematic career education in compulsory schools (Buland et al., 2011; EVA, 2022a; SOU2019:4; Tryggvadóttir et al., 2014).

To better understand the challenges of implementing career education, a comparison of the Nordic countries is needed. The main aim of this study is to map and compare the formalisation of career education in compulsory schools across the region. We will focus on input factors, such as mandates and guidelines for career education activities, as they appear in legislation, curricula, and national documents. Only few cross-national comparisons focusing exclusively on career education have been conducted (Barnes, 2020). It is important to take a closer look at the complex features, logistics, and context of this foundational part of lifelong guidance systems (ELGPN, 2015). Cross-national mapping and comparison is important for educational professionals, leaders, and policy-makers in these countries as they can learn from others in similar contexts and cultures (e.g. Sultana, 2017).

IMPLEMENTATION OF CAREER EDUCATION IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

Career education as a systematic attempt to support pupils' career development through educational strategies (Niles & Harris-Bowlsby, 2009) has a long history internationally (Barnes et al., 2011, 2020; Guichard, 2001; Hoyt, 2005) and in the Nordic countries (Merimaa, 2018; Røise, 2020). *Career guidance* has been used as an umbrella term for a broad range of career support activities and services, career education among them (Patton & McMahon, 2021), collectively referred to as CEG. *Career guidance* is often seen as a form of counselling that helps individuals make decisions about their future careers (Guichard, 2001; Savickas, 2011). According to Haug et al. (2020), career education and guidance in the Nordic countries focuses more on learning than on decision-making at transition points. Career learning relates to the

school's general values and educational purpose, which is to foster self-awareness, help build a cohesive society, and raise awareness of norms and stereotypes (e.g. Boelskifte Skovhus & Bjerg Mølgaard, 2022; Skovhus & Thomsen, 2020).

European policy documents suggest the establishment of coherent guidance systems (e.g., European Council, 2004) supporting the lifelong development of career management skills (CMS). A comprehensive career education strategy in schools, including curriculum-based, out-of-school experiences and solid career information, is promoted as an accessible and cost-effective means of fostering citizens' CMS development (ELGPN, 2015). Although career education is emphasised in European guidance policy documents and the Nordic educational systems share a certain base of legal mandates, school systems, contexts, and values, the countries differ when it comes to compulsory education students' access to career learning opportunities.

Starting in Iceland, 42% of compulsory education schools do not address career education topics (Erlingsdóttir & Guðmundsdóttir, 2017). Only about 20% of schools offer mandatory or elective career education courses (Tryggvadóttir et al., 2014), while 12% of career guidance counsellors' working time is spent educating students about jobs and further educational opportunities, and they rarely teach lessons or provide group counselling (Mennta- og barnamálaráðuneytið, 2020). The situation in Sweden is similar. National evaluations (Skolinspektionen, 2013; SOU 2019:4) have concluded that Swedish schools do not provide students with individualised career guidance. One review also indicates that career guidance work is not sufficiently regulated (SOU 2019:4). Management is also a challenge in Denmark. More than 75% of managers at municipal guidance centres (UU) find that primary and lower secondary schools do not prioritise systematic career education and that closer collaboration between guidance units and schools is needed for the implementation of the legally mandated career education courses (EVA, 2022a).

In Norway, career education is a mandatory subject. Nevertheless, a national study of quality development shows that the organisation of career learning opportunities differs across schools (Mordal et al., 2022). In 2021, the National Quality Framework for Career Guidance was recently introduced to ensure that Norwegians have access to high-quality career services (Bakke et al., 2021). In Greenland and the Faroe Islands, national evaluations on career education and guidance have yet to be conducted. A recent study, however, indicates that career counsellors in Faroese compulsory schools find it difficult to find time for career education in lessons (Petersen, 2020). Finland is an exception, with systematic uniform implementation, as career education is a compulsory subject in all schools (Finnish National Board for Education, 2016; Merimaa, 2018; Toni & Vuorinen, 2020).

OUTCOMES, STANDARDS, AND GUIDELINES FOR CAREER EDUCATION

Systematic career education provides access to career learning opportunities, positively impacts students' career development, and influences pupils' skills, including their capacity to navigate the educational system and the labour market (Hughes & Gration, 2009). There is also a correlation between immediate learning outcomes and longer-term social and economic outcomes (Hughes et al., 2016). A recent review supports the notion that when young people get the opportunity to think about, explore, and experience the labour market in secondary education, their economic and psychological well-being improves (Mann et al., 2021), an important aim of the egalitarian Nordic education systems.

Few studies on the impact of career education have been conducted in the Nordic countries. In Denmark, participation in career education was associated with increased enrolment in general and vocational education courses, especially among those students whose parents were low-income and not highly skilled (Eriksen et al., 2021). Structured discovery- and experiential-based approaches had a positive impact on career learning and reduced the high dropout rates in upper secondary schools in Iceland (Vilhjálmssdóttir, 2007, 2010). Finally, an international comparison of 22 countries based on PISA surveys (Sweet et al., 2014) shows that 15-year-olds' participation levels in career development activities is the highest in Finland and Denmark, the only two Nordic countries included in the study. Finland scored highest in

students' self-evaluation of their career competencies, with school considered the main source of these competencies. Danish students, on the other hand, ranked slightly below average in their perceived career development competence despite high participation levels, and school was considered a less important source of these competencies than sources outside of school (Sweet et al., 2014).

A vast body of literature takes a comparative approach to career guidance policies and systems across countries (e.g., Barnes et al., 2020; Sweet, 2004; Watts, 2005). A recent study by Kettunen and colleagues (2023) sums this up and provides a framework for evaluating lifelong guidance systems. *Legislation, leadership, cooperation, delivery, professionalisation, and evidence of impact* are dimensions of variations in career experts' conception of system development in lifelong guidance (Kettunen et al., 2023). Previous international comparisons have centred on career guidance or lifelong guidance; while career education is acknowledged as an important part of the systems, it has not been the focus of the comparison (Barnes et al., 2020) as it is in the present study.

Standards for practice have been developed that can inform the comparison of career education in the Nordic countries. The European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) addresses career education as part of guidelines on lifelong guidance for school pupils. A comprehensive approach to career learning within the curriculum, using information and community resources for learning, is seen as the hallmark of best practices along with educated staff, outcome focus, and standards for monitoring quality (ELGPN, 2015). Gatsby (2014) benchmarks for good career guidance in the UK also emphasise systematic approaches that foster career learning in conjunction with information and experience. Accordingly, every school in the UK should have a career education programme, all teachers should link curriculum to career learning, and workplace and higher education visits should be provided. Similarly, New Zealand's career development benchmarks for secondary schools (Careers New Zealand, 2016) put CMS at the centre as outcomes but define three *input* dimensions to outline what the schools must provide: *Leadership, programme, and services* (school-wide approach) and *transitions* (to work or higher education). Finally, in a quality handbook on guidance in secondary schools (Sultana, 2018), *career learning programmes* and development of *partnership input* in career education are mentioned as two of six important features. Content, curricular organisations, teaching personnel and methodologies, and assessment modes are named as aspects of the career education programmes to be examined.

In comparing measures intended to prevent early school dropouts across Europe, the main differences detected in career education within the Nordic countries were 1) whether career education was provided as an integrated (compulsory), separate, or cross-curricular topic and 2) the qualifications of the staff involved, especially teachers (Eurydice, 2014). A comprehensive comparison of career education in Nordic compulsory schools has yet to be conducted. The Nordic education systems are decentralised (e.g. Imsen et al., 2016); education laws, curricula, and policies define career guidance and education at the national level, but individual regions and schools determine what implementation will look like. We, therefore, decided to map out the national legal and curricular foundations (input or formalisation) of career education because it sets the stage for practices and lays the foundation for implementation and outcomes.

The main question addressed in this study is which commonalities and differences can be identified through a comparison of the national legal and curricular foundation of career education across the Nordic countries? Existing standards, guidelines, and comparative studies (Barnes et al., 2020; Careers New Zealand, 2016; ELGPN, 2015; Finnish National Board for Education, 2016; Gatsby, 2016; Haug et al., 2020; Sultana, 2018) point to important features we need to consider in the analysis of formalisation of career education in the Nordics. At this stage, we will focus on the input factors, such as legislation, including professionalisation, and curriculum, along with organisation and national procedures to understand impact; however, we will leave out content for the most part and learning approaches.

MATERIAL REVIEWED AND PROCEDURES FOR COMPARISON

The comparison was conducted by the NOS-HS funded network NordicCareerEd, a platform for Nordic scholars interested in the future of career education in the Nordic countries and self-governing areas (<https://peda.net/nordiccareered>). Existing documents on CEG national

legislation, curriculum guidelines, and policies were compiled, summarised, and compared. A collaborative approach was taken, with one representative from each of the seven countries in the Nordic region contributing on this study. An iterative procedure of data collection and comparison was used to co-construct a broad map (Sobe, 2018) that captures the similarities and differences in career education in the Nordic countries.

First, each of the seven country representatives compiled the material and summarised it in a so-called country paper with their country teams. For each country, career education in compulsory schools was described according to 1. National legislation and policies, 2. The national curriculum, and 3. Other national documents relevant to career education. Additionally, each country team provided a short review of the current research on career education in compulsory schools in their respective country. At the network's first meeting, each country paper was shared, presenting the context and delivery of career education in their country. Similarities and differences were thus roughly classified.

This resulted in the identification of three broad input factors relevant to the comparison: 1. *Preconditions – laws and policies, organisational structures* 2. *Core – curriculum and professional knowledge* 3. *Implementation – alignment and quality*. Each factor consists of more specific elements, such as *allocation of hours, work experience placement, and guidance counsellors' and teachers' roles*. In the next phase, a table was constructed and organised according to the three factors and sub-elements. Each country representative filled in the table based on the country documents compiled. For validation purposes, the information emerging in the table was discussed in the group for shared understanding and checked with a wider group of experts in each country if needed. For example, terms such as *act, laws and legislation, statutes, regulations, and curriculum* needed to be clearly defined in each national context.

It was also a challenge to organise the input factors into a common framework with broad categories and sub-elements of career education that enabled comparison across countries. For instance, in some countries, career education is defined and described as its own subject with a specific curriculum, in others it is mentioned as part of the general curriculum, and in a few cases, there is no mention of career education in the national curriculum. This also applies to the content of each category. For example, in most countries, the national curriculum can be considered legislation. Because it is the most proximal guide for implementation, it was decided curriculum deserved a category on its own, with other legally mandated activities such as work experiences classified as sub-categories. Refined categories with sub-elements gradually emerged based on the systematic information gathering, comparison, and conferring across all seven countries in the region.

FINDINGS: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN CAREER EDUCATION LEGISLATION AND CURRICULUM

The comparison resulted in a common Nordic map of input factors important for implementation of career education in compulsory schools. It consists of four general categories: 1. *National legislation*, 2. *National curriculum*, 3. *Organisation and roles*, and 4. *Quality and evaluation*, each consisting of two to six sub-categories. Below, each of the four parts is described, drawing out the core features, commonalities, and differences of career education in the Nordic region, both at the general level and focusing on more specific elements. Table 1 gives an overview of the results and summarises the comparison of career education across the seven Nordic countries.

1. NATIONAL LEGISLATION

Legislation indicates the level of attention paid to career education by the political system and society. The legal commonalities and differences in entitlement to career guidance and the legal framing of professional qualifications required to carry out these services are introduced in this first category.

Legal entitlement to career guidance

Compulsory education acts in the Nordic countries usually identify career guidance as a student's right. For example, the Swedish Education Act states that (SFS 2010:800, *Skollag*) 'Pupils in all forms of school, ... must have access to staff with such competence that their

need for guidance before choosing future educational and professional activities can be met'. In Iceland, 'Pupils are entitled to receive educational and vocational guidance from an expert' (Lög um grunnskóla, 91/2008), and in Finland, the Basic Education Act (Perusopetuslaki, 628/1998/2020, § 11) states that every pupil is entitled to adequate career guidance services (§ 30). Once students have completed compulsory education, the provider of comprehensive school education remains responsible for guidance until students begin their studies in the next phase of education (Finnish National Board for Education, 2016).

In Greenland's Compulsory Education Act (Atuarfik pillugu Inatsisartut inatsississaattut siunnersuut nr. 15/2012-imeersoq), content that usually falls under career education is placed under a subject called Personal Development. Students' right to career guidance is clearly stipulated in the Faroese Compulsory School Act (Fólkaskúlalógin 125/1997, amended 85/2022, kap. 2). The Norwegian Education Act (Opplæringsloven, 1998/2000) distinguishes between two types of counselling, career counselling, which must be offered both individually and in groups, and educational counselling: 'Students have the right to the necessary advice on education, career choices and on social issues' (§9-2). In Denmark, career guidance professionals employed at municipal youth guidance units are charged with providing career guidance regarding the transition to further education or work (Undervisningsministeriet, 2017, 2019a, §3).

Professional qualifications of career guidance counsellors

A certain level of professional qualification is required to provide the legally mandated career guidance in most of the countries. In Iceland, for instance, an MA degree (120 ECTS) is required to become a career guidance counsellor (Lög um náms- og starfsráðgjafa, nr. 35/2009). In Finland, school counsellors' qualifications and competencies are closely regulated, requiring either a master's degree in school counselling or a 60 ECTS postgraduate diploma (Valtioneuvoston asetus opetustoimen henkilöstön kelpoisuusvaatimuksista 986/1998). In Sweden and the Faroe Islands, career guidance must be provided by personnel with relevant skills and training (Kunngerð um skólavegleiðing 69/2010; SFS 2010:800). In Denmark, guidance professionals employed in the public career guidance system are required to complete a 60-ECTS postgraduate diploma or master's-level programme in career guidance. In addition, practitioners in Denmark with extensive experience in the field can apply for assessment and recognition of their competencies and prior learning (Undervisningsministeriet, 2022, §34). Norwegian municipalities increasingly require formal education for those providing career guidance (30–60 ECTS) (See Andreassen et al., 2019 and Vuorinen & Kettunen, 2017 for further information).

Teachers' qualifications for career education

In Finland, teacher education studies, both the class teacher and subject teacher degree programmes, include career learning and guidance topics. An education expert should also become familiar with the systems of lifelong guidance. Otherwise, few seeds have been planted across the Nordics to improve teachers' competence in supporting career learning. Notably, three universities in Norway recently offered Education Choice as an elective subject in primary school teacher education (30 ECTS in 2019, 2023) or as continuing education. In Denmark, a new teacher education curriculum contains an optional subject on 'education and work' corresponding to two and a half ECTS credits (Regeringen, 2022).

2. NATIONAL CURRICULUM

A formal national curriculum has legal standing and provides a framework for learning outcomes often described in terms of the knowledge, skills, and competencies that the compulsory school system should aim to help students achieve. In this part of the analysis, we draw attention to how career education is presented in national curricula, hours are allocated to the topic, or whether it is described as part of other subjects. Other more specific activities for career learning that were repeatedly mentioned in the national laws and documents, especially work experiences, are included in this category.

Career education in general curriculum

Legally mandated career guidance, and in some cases career education, is specifically addressed in the national curricula of most Nordic countries. The Swedish curriculum states that students must be provided with a basis for choosing a further educational path. Additionally, the curriculum highlights that students have equal rights and opportunities, regardless of gender, and that schools have a responsibility to counteract gender patterns that limit students' learning, choices, and development (Skolverket, 2022a). In the Faroe Islands, the introduction to the curriculum states that each pupil's personal development should be supported, and career education-related topics are mentioned within all subjects (Námsætlanir, 2023). In Greenland, career education is addressed in the Education Act (Atuarfik pillugu Inatsisartut inatsississaattut siunnersuut nr.15/2012), where the topic is part of a subject called Personal Development that deals with issues related to career learning. In Iceland, career guidance and education are mentioned as one of the pillars of education in the national curriculum (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2011), encompassing student welfare, future plans, study problems/skills, and information about education and work. Other countries have formalised career education more explicitly by describing it as a specific subject and developed subject curriculum for separate career education courses, to which we now turn.

Specific curriculum for career education

In Finland, career education is a compulsory subject in the curriculum (Finnish National Board for Education, 2016). It is both a transversal theme in all subjects as well as a specific subject (FI: oppilaanohjaus) with its own curriculum, and while all staff members are responsible for the provision of career education, the main responsibility lies with the guidance counsellors. Career education addresses topics such as study skills and school attendance, self-knowledge, opportunities for further studies, and working life. The curriculum mentions career management skills as explicit competencies. (Finnish National Board for Education, 2016). In Denmark (Undervisningsministeriet, 2019b, §7) and in Norway's Utdanningsdirektoratet (2020), there is a specific subject curriculum in career education for legally mandated courses called, respectively, *Education and Work* (DK: Uddannelse og job) and *Educational Choice* (NO: Utdanningsvalg). In Denmark, three central themes run through the subject curriculum: personal choice, the transition from education to work, and work-life knowledge. The broad aim of the subject's curriculum is to develop career competencies. In the Norwegian curriculum, the aim is to develop career competencies, understand and develop oneself, explore educational opportunities and working life, and develop skills for making choices and understanding the consequences of those choices.

Timetabled lessons allocated

Denmark and Finland prescribe career education subjects through all the curricular levels, from preschool through grade 9 or 10. In Norway, the focus in the national curriculum is on grades 8–10. The national curricula of Norway and Finland allocate 110 and 76 hours, respectively, to career education. In the remaining countries, career education is not as clearly represented in the national curriculum and time is not allocated for career education as a specific subject. Interestingly, in Denmark, where the specific subject of *Education and Work* is defined with accompanying curriculum, no hours are allocated to the subject. In addition, Danish schools can offer an elective course on *Arbejdskendskab* (work-knowledge) in 8th and 9th grade.

Work experience placements

Work experience placement (WEP) provides opportunities for career learning and varies in its legal framework across the Nordic countries. In Sweden (SFS 2010:800; Skolverket, 2022b) and the Faroe Islands (Fólkaskúalóggin 125/1997), legislation requires schools to provide compulsory education students with the opportunity to complete one to two weeks of work experience. In Finland, work experience placements are compulsory, as specified in the national core curriculum (Finnish National Board for Education, 2016). In Denmark, students in grades 8 and 9 are entitled to week-long workplace visits, organised by schools or the pupils themselves (Undervisningsministeriet, 2019a). In Norway's decentralised education system, schools can organise work visits if they choose. Similarly, in Greenland and Iceland there is no legal mandate, but work experiences are or have been offered to some students in grades 8–10 for personal development.

Taster courses

In Denmark, schools are legally required to offer opportunities for students to visit upper secondary schools for so-called taster courses (Undervisningsministeriet, 2019a). Taster courses, which entail students visiting upper secondary schools and attending courses for a few days, are mandatory in Denmark, as the upper secondary school programmes that receive the pupils are subsidised (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2022a). Taster courses are also well-established in Finland, where the local institutional curriculum must also include a description of cooperation with the local labour market and business community. Classroom visits from labour market representatives, taster courses, workplace visits, project work, and the use of informational materials from different sectors are central parts of this cooperation (Kettunen et al., 2023; Toni & Vuorinen, 2020). Taster courses and work experiences are also mentioned in the Faroese Compulsory School Act (Fólkaskúalógin 85/2022) and both are practised. In other countries, such taster courses are not legally mandated; for example, they are optional in Norway.

3. ORGANISATION AND ROLES

The organisational structures, assignment of roles, and collaboration provide channels for the implementation of legal mandates on career education. In most cases, schools in the Nordic countries are responsible for offering career education, with career counsellors and teachers being the ones supporting learning. The need to partner with external organisations and businesses and coordinate with other levels of the education system sets career education apart from most other school subjects, as is also described here.

Separate or integrated organisation

As the differences in formalising career education topics in the national curricula across the Nordic countries indicate, career education is organised at various levels, with separate or integrated delivery forms. In Finland, career education is a compulsory element of the curriculum in grades 7–9, with integrated individual guidance, group counselling, and practical on-site work experience. In grades 1–6, guidance is embedded in classroom teachers' work. In Sweden, a whole-school approach is advocated, meaning career education must be integrated into all subjects and is the responsibility of all personnel (Skolverket, 2013; 2022a). In Greenland, career education topics are integrated into a subject called *Personal Development* (Atuarfik pillugu Inatsisartut inatsississaattut siunnersuut nr.15/2012). In Iceland, there is no general approach advocated, although the topic is mentioned both in the general part of the curriculum and under a few specific subjects (Mennta- og menningarmálaáðuneytið, 2011). In the Faroe Islands, career education is rarely offered as a separate class (Petersen, 2020) despite a regulation (Kunngerð um skólavegleiðing 69/2010) stating that the topic of educational choices should be organised into lessons, both for groups and individuals.

School administrators

In the decentralised education systems of the Nordic countries, the responsibility for organising and implementing career education and guidance lies with individual schools. Administrators, municipalities, or private schools (e.g., Sweden) are responsible for ensuring students' right to career guidance and career education activities is upheld. Denmark represents a special case, with municipality-run youth guidance units providing schools with career counsellors (Undervisningsministeriet, 2019a). While Danish legislation states that career counsellors and teachers should collaborate to deliver legally mandated career education classes (Undervisningsministeriet, 2019b), oftentimes they fail to do so (EVA, 2022a, 2022b). In fact, municipalities in Denmark are legally required to present a coordinated, coherent plan for delivering career guidance and career education activities. This places the responsibility on school principals. In the Faroe Islands' Compulsory School Act (Fólkaskúalógin 85/2022), the school administrator is responsible for determining the mode of delivery of career guidance in cooperation with the career guidance counsellor.

Teachers

Where career education is integrated into other subjects, as is the case in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, all *subject teachers* (e.g., social studies, natural sciences, English, etc.) are responsible for delivering career education. In Finland, all teachers are expected to link their subjects to overall career learning objectives as well as to instruct their students in study skills (Finnish National Board for Education, 2016). In Denmark, teachers are expected to collaborate with career guidance counsellors from the youth centres to implement career education in a way that enables students to achieve the learning outcomes described in the curriculum for the subject *Education and Work*. In Norway, where there is a subject curriculum with hours allocated, the recent introduction of a specialisation in career education indicates that it is indeed teachers who are expected to cover the topic. In the three countries where career education is weakly classified as a systematic educational strategy, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Iceland, some subject teachers are involved. Subject teachers teach Personal Development courses mandated by Greenland's Compulsory Education Act. There is no holistic view of career education in Iceland, but the national curriculum (*Mennta og menningarmálaráðuneytið*, 2011) indicates that knowledge of work life should be delivered as part of social studies and in arts and crafts. Subject teachers in the Faroe Islands are mandated by the curriculum (*Námsætlanir*, 2023) to address topics related to career education.

Career guidance counsellors

In most of the Nordic countries, legally mandated career support services are made available by *career guidance counsellors* hired by and located in schools, except in Denmark, where career guidance professionals are employed full time at municipal youth centres as part of a professionalisation strategy. Nevertheless, they are expected to work with teachers in the schools to implement the career education subject curriculum. In Norway, career guidance counsellors sometimes teach career education courses. In Finland, guidance counsellors oversee the timetabled career education sessions, cooperate with other teachers, and coordinate practical work experience placements (Finnish National Board for Education, 2016). In Iceland, career guidance counsellors teach elective career education courses, and in some cases, career education is part of life skills courses (Tryggvadóttir et al., 2014). In the Faroe Islands and Greenland, where teachers have allocated hours for guidance work, the principal decides the level of cooperation. This is similar in Sweden; roles are loosely defined, but school principals are responsible for drawing up plans for collaboration between the school's various types of staff (Skolverket, 2013).

The implementation of career education also requires collaboration and coordination of practices outside schools (e.g., labour market, career and youth centres, upper secondary schools). In most of the Nordic countries, collaboration is not clearly defined in legal or policy documents. There are a few exceptions, including Denmark, as described above, and Norway's Education Act (*Opplæringsloven 1998/2000*) states that the school must, to the extent that it is possible, involve external partners such as upper secondary schools, local businesses, and students' families. The career counsellor is considered to play a central role in creating collaborative networks needed for career education and guidance. In Finland, the school guidance counsellor also plays a central role in coordination. This is defined clearly in the national core curriculum, which is a normative policy document. School guidance counsellors cooperate with the local labour market and business community, support students in practical work-experience placements at businesses, visits to workplaces, project work, (Finnish National Board for Education, 2016) and with the One-stop Guidance Service Centres (Kettunen & Felt, 2020).

4. QUALITY AND EVALUATION

Finally, for implementation of successful career education, the Nordic partners concurred that the legal mandates, curricula, and provisions described above need to be aligned and their quality assured. Yet formal comprehensive evaluation of career education as a separate entity is rare. However, there are a few examples of quality standards and evaluation of career guidance services and systems, including career education.

Quality standards

Quality standards for practice and procedures rarely exist specifically for career education. However, in Finland, besides the national core curriculum (Finnish National Board for Education, 2016), the Finnish National Agency for Education (2023) has published guideline for good guidance. Accordingly, each school prepares guidance plans in cooperation with all parties involved (students, guardians, and stakeholders). As part of Norway’s National Quality Framework for career guidance, quality standards for career guidance and career education have been developed and have recently informed a national study of the quality of career guidance in compulsory schools (Mordal et al., 2022).

Evaluations

The central responsibility for developing career education and guidance lies with organisations at the national level. In Greenland, it is the Centre for National Guidance (AQQUT) and in Norway, the Directorate for Higher Education and Skills. In Finland, Denmark, and Sweden, it is the national agencies for education that play that role. Formal evaluation of career education in compulsory education has been conducted by a few of these agencies, but it does not seem to be standard practice. In Denmark, there is no systematic and recurring public evaluation of practices (career education courses, work visits, and taster courses), but the national Danish Evaluation Institute recently conducted studies on pupils’ transition from lower to upper secondary education, including a focus on career guidance and related activities and the collaboration between municipal guidance centres and schools (EVA, 2022a). In Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture has commissioned national level thematic evaluations to follow up the recommendations presented in the national cross-ministerial lifelog guidance strategy 2020–23. A recent national study on quality and quality development of guidance in Norway (Mordal et al., 2022) shows that quality development and quality assurance in career guidance are not high priorities in schools. The Ministry of Education in Iceland (Mennta- og barnamálaráðuneytið, 2020) does not mention career education in its most recent report on guidance. Formal evaluation of the legally mandated career guidance in compulsory education has not yet been conducted in the Faroe Islands or Greenland. However, in Greenland AQQUT, due to lack of national policies, does gather career guidance workers and teachers from all over Greenland biannually to coordinate and improve practices.

Table 1 Formalisation of career education across the Nordic countries, summary of comparison.

	DENMARK	FAROE ISLANDS	FINLAND	GREENLAND	NORWAY	ICELAND	SWEDEN
National legislation							
Legal entitlement to career guidance	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Professional qualifications of career guidance	required	short course required	regulated	none	municipalities decide	regulated licensed	required
Teachers’ qualifications for career education	optional courses offered	none	integrated into teacher’s subject area	none	optional courses offered	none	none
National curriculum							
Career education in general curriculum	mandatory topic	mandatory topic	mandatory subject	topic within another subject	mandatory subject?	mentioned as topic	integrated into other subjects
Specific curriculum for career education	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no	no
Timetabled lessons allocated	no	no	yes: 76 hours	no	yes: 110 hours	no	no
Work experience placement	student right	mandatory	mandatory	optional	optional	not stated	student right
Taster courses	mandatory	optional	yes	no	optional	no	no

(Contd.)

	DENMARK	FAROE ISLANDS	FINLAND	GREENLAND	NORWAY	ICELAND	SWEDEN
Organisation and roles							
Separate or integrated	optional	optional	both	optional	separate	optional	integrated
School administrators	responsible and leading	responsible	responsible	responsible	responsible	responsible	responsible
Teachers	CE courses and subjects	subjects	subjects	personal development subject	CE courses	some subjects	subjects
Guidance counsellors	CE courses and guidance, cooperation	CE courses and guidance	CE courses and guidance, cooperation, and coordination	guidance	CE courses and guidance	guidance and optional CE courses and modules	guidance
Quality and evaluation							
National quality framework	no	no	yes	no	yes	no	no
Evaluation initiated nationally	ad hoc	no	self-evaluations and surveys	no	systematic student evaluations and ad hoc	no	no

DISCUSSION

Analysis of national documents on CEG across the Nordic countries resulted in a broad but comprehensive comparison identifying both commonalities and differences of the national legal and curricular foundation of career education in the region (see Table 1 for overview). Career education shares similar essential features across the seven countries as a systematic educational strategy. They largely converge when it comes to the content and importance of career learning activities. Nevertheless, the legal mandate does differ in specifications of activities (e.g., work placements, taster courses, delivery mode, and roles), and the legislation does not distinguish clearly between systematic career education and career guidance in all cases.

Three countries – Finland, Norway, and Denmark – have separate subject curricula for career education, and therefore have the strongest level of legal formalisation of career education at the compulsory level. Moreover, Norway and Finland’s national curricula also allocate hours for career education. In the smaller countries of the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Iceland, plus Sweden, career education is weakly classified in the national documents; it is either not mentioned as a specific provision or used interchangeably with guidance, and as a topic it is often vaguely presented in the legislation and curriculum, if it is included at all. As a result, career education as a systematic educational strategy (Niles & Harris-Bowlsby, 2009) is rarely offered in compulsory education in these four countries.

Despite the differences in legal framing, the Nordic countries do converge on the importance of providing various career learning opportunities in compulsory education to meet students’ strong legal right to career guidance. Additionally, work experience placements as a separate entity are addressed in laws and curriculum in Sweden, Denmark, the Faroe Islands, and Finland. This may be explained by a general emphasis on experiential activities in career guidance across the Nordic countries (Thomsen, 2014). Despite weak legal framing, work experiences have also been offered in Greenland, Iceland, and Norway. The responsible partners’ roles and the importance of collaboration both within and outside of the school setting reflects another convergence across the countries, although the division of tasks and roles of teachers and career guidance counsellors may differ somewhat (Eurydice, 2014). It is also clear that school administrators (headmasters/principals) are responsible for the provision of CEG and for involving teachers and career guidance counsellors who cooperate with parties within and outside the schools, the latter corresponding to partnership input mentioned by Sultana (2018) and transition in New Zealand (2016). Again, those roles and responsibilities are usually loosely framed, except to some extent in Finland and Denmark.

Denmark is an example of a country that has struggled to implement career education (EVA, 2022a). Compared to Finnish students, Danish students had lower levels of competence and saw school as a less important source of career learning, although students in both countries had participated in an equal amount of career development activities (Sweet et al., 2014). Career education or activities are defined in legislation, and a career education curriculum has been in place for decades for the subject Education and Work, indicating substantive legislative framing. Lack of allocation of hours to the subject, complex organisational structure, diffused responsibility between schools and municipal youth centres, and vague collaboration channels have been identified as barriers to implementation (EVA, 2022b). Taster courses, however, are an established feature of the career education landscape there, possibly due to clear allocation of financial resources for implementation. Norway also deserves special attention; it has recently seen increased political interest in guidance and career education, as reflected by stronger formalisation, recent policies, and quality frameworks. MA programmes in career guidance and career education modules for teachers have been established, but the organisation of career learning opportunities varies across schools (Mordal et al., 2022). The new quality framework supports an ongoing development of guidance that includes career education in compulsory schools.

This review is not without caveats. The process of comparison was explorative and not supported by theories of curricular development or education policymaking. However, existing standards and benchmarks for guidance systems supported the analysis. The legal documents and curricula were analysed only from the perspective of career guidance experts; the views of other experts or stakeholders were only included as represented in the national studies and evaluations that informed the analyses. Nevertheless, the comparison indicates that implementation of career education across the Nordic countries may be less than optimal due to a lack of formalisation, management, time, and support to implement the legislative framework. Finland seems to be a model when it comes to career education. The legal classification is strong, there are clear curricular guidelines, hours are allocated, responsibility is assigned, there are clearly defined roles and channels for collaboration, and quality standards are in place. All these factors seem to align and result in widespread implementation and positive outcomes for students (Sweet et al., 2014).

In the Nordic countries, students' legal right to guidance is strong, as are the requirements for guidance counsellors and teachers, though the latter's expertise in career development may be lacking in some cases. However, the structure and formalisation of the curriculum and activities in the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Sweden, and Iceland could be improved. Leadership is lacking in almost all the countries especially national policies and standards. The use of European policies and guidelines (e.g., ELGPN, 2015) are recommended for policy development. Formal channels for community cooperation are also needed, a challenge that the UK, for example, has addressed through the Careers Leader Programme (Williams et al., 2020). Future research could investigate the relation between lack of clear curricular organisation and leadership of career learning in compulsory school in the Nordic countries and continued challenges in implementation. The smaller countries and those lagging in implementation would especially benefit from policies or guidelines for career education already established in the Nordic area because the education systems share features and foundations (Thomsen, 2014).

The results of the comparison and mapping of national documents has implications for policy development and highlights the importance of administrators' leadership in decentralised compulsory education systems for improvement of career education implementation. The map draws out known dimensions of career education in guidance systems such as legal foundation, professionalisation, curriculum organization, leadership and cooperation, standards, and evaluations (e.g. *Careers New Zealand*, 2016; ELGPN, 2015; Gatsby, 2014). The elements also point to specific aspects that need further attention, such as roles, qualifications of different professionals, and collaboration outside schools. Curricular content and learning approaches (Sultana, 2018) are also important topics that need to be addressed in further research on career education in the Nordic and international contexts.

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