Students' critical reflections on learning across contexts in career education in Norway

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Abstract

Following community interaction theory and drawing upon the concept of boundary crossing, this paper investigates students' experiences of career learning across contexts when involved in placement activities. Specifically, this work focuses on students' experiences of continuity and discontinuity in relation to tensions naturally embedded in career education. For students to experience coherent career learning in lower secondary schools, career education must help relate career activities to career choice and learning by encouraging systematic reflections during preparation and follow-up. From a continuity/discontinuity perspective, when activities in out-of-school contexts are accompanied by an educational infrastructure, it can limit students' freedom to reflect on their experiences. Analysis results point to the emancipatory potential of collective reflection after the placement activities. Furthermore, the results highlight the unfulfilled potential of discontinuity as a source of career learning when moving across contexts.

Keywords Career learning · Lower secondary school · Boundary crossing

Résumé

Réflexions critiques des étudiantes sur l'apprentissage à travers les contextes dans l'enseignement professionnel en Norvège En suivant la théorie de l'interaction communautaire et en s'appuyant sur le concept de franchissement des frontières, cet article étudie les expériences des étudiantes en matière d'apprentissage professionnel à travers les contextes lorsqu'ils participent à des activités de placement. Plus précisément, ce travail se concentre sur les expériences des élèves en matière de continuité et de discontinuité par rapport aux tensions naturellement présentes dans l'éducation à la carrière. Pour que les élèves fassent l'expérience d'un apprentissage cohérent de la carrière dans les écoles secondaires inférieures, l'éducation à la carrière doit aider à relier les activités de carrière au choix de carrière et à l'apprentissage en

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encourageant des réflexions systématiques pendant la préparation et le suivi. Dans une perspective de continuité/discontinuité, lorsque les activités dans des contextes extrascolaires sont accompagnées d'une infrastructure éducative, cela peut limiter la liberté des élèves de réfléchir à leurs expériences. Les résultats de l'analyse soulignent le potentiel émancipateur de la réflexion collective après les activités de stage. En outre, les résultats soulignent le potentiel non réalisé de la discontinuité en tant que source d'apprentissage professionnel lors du passage d'un contexte à l'autre.

Zusammenfassung

Kritische Betrachtungsweisen von Schülerinnen zum kontextübergreifenden Lernen in der Berufsbildung in Norwegen In Anlehnung an die»Community Interaction Theory« und unter Bezugnahme des Konzepts»Boundary Crossing« untersucht diese Arbeit die Erfahrungen von, an Praktikumsaktivitäten beteiligten Schülerinnen mit beruflichem Lernen in verschiedenen Kontexten. Insbesondere konzentriert sich diese Arbeit auf die Erfahrungen der Schülerinnen mit Kontinuität und Diskontinuität in Bezug auf Spannungen, die natürlicherweise in der Berufsbildung auftreten können. Damit Schülerinnen in der Sekundarstufe I ein kohärentes Berufslernen erleben können, muss Berufserziehung dazu beitragen, entsprechende Aktivitäten mit Berufswahl und Lernen zu verbinden. Gelingen kann dies durch Förderung systematischer Reflexionen während der Vor- und Nachbereitung. Werden Aktivitäten in außerschulischen Kontexten von einer Bildungsinfrastruktur begleitet, so kann dies in Bezug auf Kontinuität und Diskontinuität die Freiheit der Schülerinnen einschränken, über ihre Erfahrungen nachzudenken. Analyseergebnisse weisen auf das emanzipatorische Potenzial von gemeinschaftlicher Reflexion nach den Praktikumsaktivitäten hin. Darüber hinaus heben die Ergebnisse das ungenutzte Potenzial von Diskontinuität als Quelle für berufliches Lernen über verschiedene Kontexte hervor.

Resumen

Reflexiones críticas de los estudiantes sobre el aprendizaje en distintos contextos en la educación profesional en Noruega Siguiendo la teoría de la interacción comunitaria y basándose en el concepto de cruce de fronteras, este trabajo investiga las experiencias de los estudiantes en el aprendizaje de la carrera a través de contextos cuando participan en actividades de colocación. En concreto, este trabajo se centra en las experiencias de continuidad y discontinuidad de los estudiantes en relación con las tensiones que se producen de forma natural en la educación profesional. Para que los estudiantes experimenten un aprendizaje profesional coherente en las escuelas secundarias inferiores, la educación profesional debe ayudar a relacionar las actividades profesionales con la elección y el aprendizaje de la carrera, fomentando las reflexiones sistemáticas durante la preparación y el seguimiento. Desde una perspectiva de continuidad/discontinuidad, cuando las actividades en contextos extraescolares van acompañadas de una infraestructura educativa, puede limitar la libertad de los estudiantes para reflexionar sobre sus experiencias. Los resultados del análisis apuntan al potencial emancipador de la reflexión colectiva tras las actividades de prácticas. Además, los resultados ponen de manifiesto el potencial no aprovechado de la discontinuidad como fuente de aprendizaje profesional cuando se cambia de contexto.

Introduction

Some countries have adopted an integrated "whole-school approach" to career education, whilst others have introduced career education as a separate subject in the curriculum (Sultana, 2012; Røise, 2020). The latter is the case in Norway, where the subject is known as *Educational Choice* [*Utdanningsvalg*]. As part of the obligatory lower secondary education curriculum, the compulsory subject, *Educational Choice,* was first introduced in schools in 2008 and revised in 2015. A third revision was introduced in Norwegian schools in the school year 2020/2021. All three revisions describe, in variations, the core of the subject, which revolves around students learning how to make sound educational and vocational choices based on their interests and prerequisites, in addition to acquiring knowledge about opportunities and requirements in the educational system and working life (The Norwegian Directorate for Education & Training,Ok 2008, 2015, 2020). A central aim for career education is to create a connection between different school contexts and the world of work (Plant, 2020).

In 2017, a new educational reform reintroduced overriding values and principles for primary and secondary education in Norway. It stated that the overall objective of education is to "open doors to the world" for students. Moreover, students "shall develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes so that they can master their lives and take part in working life and society. They shall have the opportunity to be creative, committed, and inquisitive" (Ministry of Education & Research, 2017, p. 3). These values and principles are relevant to career education. A core element of the *Educational Choice* curriculum is to facilitate a fundamental link between school and the world of work. Such a notion of coherence could allow students to expand their horizons, thus opening doors to their future educational and vocational possibilities. However, career activities outside the school context seem challenging to organize and integrate into other subject curricula (Lødding & Holen, 2012; Plant, 2020; Skovhus & Poulsen, 2021; Skovhus & Thomsen, 2020).

Moreover, to develop career education, more research from the perspective of those receiving career education is required (Haug, 2016; Haug & Plant, 2016; Poulsen et al., 2016). Therefore, the current article elucidates students' experiences of career learning through work experience activities, where they visit workplaces for a week or a day as a part of the *Educational Choice* subject. A series of focus groups were conducted to create a space for students to discuss career learning topics and meet the need for research from the students' perspective.

The background for introducing *Educational Choice* in 2008 was an overriding goal to reduce the number of students changing educational trajectories and the alarming drop-out rates in the upper secondary education level (Borgen & Lødding, 2009, p. 7). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported the need to reduce the drop-out rate in upper secondary and higher education in Norway and the problem of lower completion rates amongst students of vocational courses (OECD, 2014). It also highlighted the large gap between Norwegian young people's educational choices and competency needs in the labour market (OECD, 2014). This can be regarded as a dialectic opposition between

individual and societal needs, which is also represented in the curriculum of *Educational Choice* (Kjærgård, 2016). A critical investigation into the subject curriculum revealed an underlying rationale of "the individual being responsible for their own education and employability, in the near future and throughout their lives" (Røise, 2020, p. 277). Thus, *Educational Choice* must meet societal efficiency considerations. However, it should also meet individual students' needs to make good and meaningful educational choices.

In Norway, research has been done within career guidance and counselling to evaluate and develop insights into the implementation and practices regarding the quality of delivering *Educational Choice* (Haug, 2016; Lødding & Borgen, 2008; Lødding & Holen, 2012). An evaluation of the 2008 curriculum implementation emphasized that the subject must also meet the needs of students who struggle the most in utilizing written information, dealing with uncertainty, and reflecting on their own possibilities to reduce drop-out rates (Borgen & Lødding, 2009). A study found that the subject can have very different designs and content (Buland et al., 2011). Many schools describe well-structured and established academic programmes, whilst some see the possibility of modifying the subject to adapt to local challenges. Other schools, however, are uncertain about its implementation. Sometimes, the time allocated to *Educational Choice* is spent on other subjects that teachers value as more important (Buland et al., 2014). Quantitative research on students' experience of transitioning from lower to upper secondary school showed that teachers and counsellors had little influence on students' choice of upper secondary school. Family, friends, salary, and cultural factors—such as gender and occupational status—often override the school's role (Mjaavatn & Frostad, 2018). Furthermore, career counsellors understand the concept of career as a democratic idea, but students interpret it as a project of hierarchical advancement (Bakke & Hooley, 2020). In summary, providing career education in lower secondary schools in Norway seems challenging, and it is questionable whether such targeted education achieves the learning outcomes intended for students.

In an international context, career education seems to have continued relevance for researchers (Guichard, 2001; Hughes & Karp, 2004; Hughes et al., 2016; Kashefpakdel & Percy, 2017; Kuijpers & Meijers, 2009; Sultana, 2013; Vaughan & Spiller, 2012). Career education as a preventive approach to early school leaving has also been investigated (Oomen & Plant, 2014). One study found that a collective and group approach to guidance and counselling gives students a clearer picture of what to do with education, enabling them to develop their self-perception and motivation to complete a given curriculum (Mariager-Anderson et al., 2020).

Moreover, there has been relevant research on the provision of career education. Danish research on career education in compulsory schools highlighted the need for a broader focus on career learning in general and decreased focus on career choice in particular (Skovhus, 2018). Another Danish research and development project on career learning focussed on expanding views on education and the world of work. The study found that teachers focussing on preparation, execution, and reflection contribute to students developing an increased curiosity and openness upon choosing upper secondary education in general and more positive attitudes towards vocational programmes in particular (Klindt Poulsen, 2020). According to Vaughan and

Spiller (2012), career education in New Zealand is considered an interruption to the subject orientation of schools and is focussed on interventions for less academically able students. Instead of focussing on information, their studies have suggested that career activities advance workplace-based and participatory learning. (Vaughan, 2010; Vaughan & Spiller, 2012).

Other studies in career education have investigated employer engagement (Mann, 2012; Mann & Dawkins, 2014). Looking into placement activities in career education for 14-to 15-year-old students, Messer found that students' beliefs in their own employability skills appeared to be strengthened through placement. However, placement activities may "reproduce social-economic inequalities and fail to challenge stereotypes about gender related employment" (2017, p. 24). Similar perspectives are promoted by studies on the work experience placements of secondary students. One study argued that "If work experience is about learning about labour, it is about how working class kids get working class placements and middle class kids get managerial and professional ones" (Hatcher & Le Gallais, 2008, p. 73). To achieve the aim of career education to widen students' horizons, both vocationally and educationally, Hatcher and Le Gallais (2008) suggested providing students with ample workplace experiences of different types and durations, commencing before secondary education and integrated into the wider curriculum.

Meanwhile, Sultana (2012) suggested that an integrated solution can strengthen the connection between career education and other aspects of the curriculum. However, according to Røise, "[a] problem that can arise is that if career education is everybody's responsibility, there is a danger of it becoming no one's" (2020, p. 269). Thus, for students to experience coherent career learning in lower secondary school, career education must help relate career activities to career choice and career learning by encouraging systematic reflections on preparation and follow-up (Skovhus & Poulsen, 2021). Expanding on this perspective, the current paper explores the challenges that emerge when aiming for more coherent career education from the students' viewpoint. This study contributes to the literature with knowledge regarding the complicated challenges schools and students face in connecting career education to out-of-school contexts.

Career learning across contexts

According to the career learning theorist Bill Law (1996), different career learning theories put different phenomena in the foreground. For example, some theories describe career learning in psychological terms, such as trait-and-factor and self-concept theories (Law, 1996). In comparison, the current article builds upon descriptions of career learning through a more sociological term, namely, "community interaction" (Law, 1996, p. 50). Community interaction theory offers foregrounding significance to the process of career learning through engagement in and reflection upon encounters between individuals and their community (Law, 1981). Through social exchange processes, community interaction functions as a transmitter for motivation and a modifier for social functioning (Law, 1981, 2009). A community can be regarded as a family, peer group, neighbourhood, and ethnic group

that "mediates and modifies psychological and sociological influences on career development" (Bosley, 2004, p. 47).

An emancipatory notion underpins community interaction theory in which critical insights can be gained through increased interactions with the community. "Such thinking sets career development in its more immediate community context: emphasising, for example, the importance of both the entrapping and the liberating effects of learners' roles in their own neighbourhoods" (Law, 1996, p. 30). It suggests that social exchanges support a person's goal of developing new points of view on work, role, and oneself. According to Law, "the more ways a person has for framing what is going on, the more options she has for dealing with it. That is freedom" (2004, p. 52).

The present study takes on a sociocultural perspective on career learning, where a process of mediation through work experience in career education provides students "with a basis for connecting their context-specific learning with ideas of practices which may have originated outside those contexts" (Guile & Griffiths, 2001, p. 124). Law describes this process as follows:

> In order to achieve transfer of learning, a student must, at first imaginatively, relocate him or herself to some*where* else, doing some*thing* else, with some*one* else. This specification of what comes *out* of the classroom is what distinguishes *out*comes from objectives. An objective is what you can learn; an outcome is how you can use it. However desirable, such transfer is not easily achieved. But without it is difficult to imagine what point there could be to careers education. (Law, 1999, p. 46)

According to Akkerman and Bakker (2011), transfer can be associated with one-time and one-sided transitions in which sociocultural differences are regarded as problematic. This study follows the ideas underlying boundary crossing theory to reconceptualize transfer in career learning. "A boundary can be seen as a sociocultural difference leading to discontinuity in action or interaction. Boundaries simultaneously suggest a sameness and continuity in the sense that within discontinuity, two or more sites are relevant to one another in a particular way" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 133). Sociocultural differences between school and work life can cause discontinuity because students experience challenges when taking different roles or perspectives as they move between different contexts. At the same time, sameness and discontinuity anticipate that both school and work life are essential sites in which a student's career learning process occurs.

In their literature review on boundary crossing, Akkerman and Bakker (2011) distinguished four mechanisms of learning at the boundaries: identification, coordination, reflection, and transformation. Identification involves inquiring into the identity of each of the contexts, which contributes to encountering and reconstructing the different practices without necessarily overcoming discontinuities. Coordination regards learning at the boundary through boundary objects as mediating artefacts, contributing to continuity through effortless movement between contexts. Reflection relates to the role of boundary crossing in discovering and recognizing differences between practices and contexts. Finally, through a negotiation process of meaning, transformation entails changes in practices or the creation of new, in-between

practices. Overall, these learning mechanisms emphasize the meaning of "overcoming discontinuities in actions and interactions that can emerge from sociocultural difference rather than overcoming or avoiding the difference itself" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 136).

Boundary crossing builds on the idea that actions and interactions across contexts affect the individual and the social practices involved, in accordance with Law's community interaction theory. Focussing on context can strengthen the perception of learning as being limited in a single time and space (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016). Still, students experience and engage in a wide range of contexts in everyday life, and for them to follow through on their goals and interests over time, they are likely to make connections between them. Hence, applying the concept of boundary crossing in career education entails supporting students to explore reflective connections between different contexts that form their lives (Vaughan, 2010). Viewing learning as a process that potentially moves across contexts, Bronkhorst and Akkerman (2016) suggested more empirical research exploring how, if at all, out-of-school contexts differ from the school context from the students' perspective.

Taking departure from community interaction theory, drawing upon boundary crossing, this paper investigates students' experiences of career learning across contexts when involved in placement activities. Attention is focussed on the students' experiences of continuity and discontinuity concerning tensions naturally embedded in career education.

The context for the study

Inquiry into the students' career learning experiences across contexts is administered as a part of a participatory action research project, applying the research circle approach. Through the research circle approach, participants collaborate on investigating a problem based on their varied knowledge, experiences, and practices (Persson, 2008). The study presented in this article takes departure from a research circle where teachers, counsellors working in a rural area of Norway, and a research circle leader worked together through the 2018/2019 school year on developing knowledge about career education in *Educational Choice* (for more on this research circle, Røise & Bjerkholt, 2020). This research circle aimed to develop knowledge on how to understand and strengthen students' career learning between school and working life, with the intent of reducing a narrow focus on career choice and strengthening a widening perspective regarding career learning (Skovhus, 2018). This study focuses on an integrated approach to the curriculum of *Educational Choice*, which conditions cooperation within the school as an organization (Røise, 2020; Røise & Bjerkholt, 2020; Sultana, 2012) to create knowledge on the students' experience of coherence in career learning across contexts. The research circle forms the background for inquiry into students' experiences of career learning across contexts. In addition, it is a starting point to discuss coherence in career learning generally.

Placement activities

As a part of the research process in the research circle, participants focussed on pedagogical practice connected to two types of placement activities. The first activity was a school-based work experience programme in the ninth grade, which lasted for a week during spring. The work experience comprised a week of individual placement called a *workweek*, during which students followed the routines of one workplace. It was an established practice in this school that students would write a CV and a job application in response to vacancies from local workplaces, which were created for this particular week. Furthermore, an external lecturer would visit the students and teach them about job interviews before they attended actual job interviews at the companies they applied to. It was left to the companies to decide which students could come and spend the workweek with them.

As part of the developmental work in the research circle and to promote coherence in career learning, the teachers developed a question bank for the students to bring to their workweek. This contained questions related to subject topics and professional conduct. Sample questions are as follows: In what way have you used your language skills during the workweek? Does the company advertise for itself? What scheme does the company have for overtime work? Is there a percentage increase? To what extent is good physical shape an advantage in this workplace? Is there a dress code? How does the company facilitate for the disabled or those on sick leave? The included questions also tackled a company's sustainability, in which technical aids were used, and gender and age distribution concerns and their causes. The students were encouraged to find a few questions that were relevant to the workplace they visited.

Additionally, the students wrote diary notes during the workweek to help them remember and reflect on their experiences. The written and oral tasks related to the workweek were assessed as part of the curricular language subject of Norwegian. After the workweek, the students held presentations about their experiences for the rest of the class. As part of the research circle, the author observed when the students gave their presentations in the classroom. It was a common practice at this school for the school's career counsellor to follow-up on students' experiences from the placement activities in their tenth grade regarding choosing upper secondary school trajectories.

The second activity was a one-day voluntary activity, called a *workday*, wherein students could visit a workplace they were curious about. This new activity was executed as a part of the research circle to provide students with the opportunity to gain hands-on experience with a vocation that required higher education. The career counsellor who made the arrangements with the companies for this one-day visit talked with the students in preparation for the workday and drove them to the different workplaces on the workday.

Method

This study contributes to filling the knowledge gap where more research from the perspective of those receiving career education is required to develop career education (Haug, 2016; Haug & Plant, 2016; Poulsen et al., 2016). Therefore, to invite students to discuss specific topics related to career learning across contexts and to reveal underlying issues, a series of focus groups with students were conducted (Bloor et al. (2001) in Parker & Tritter, 2006, p. 24). Focus groups were carried out to gain insights into the students' experiences of career learning through placement activities and related school work (Halkier, 2010). Twenty-four students from the ninth grade, aged 14 to 15 years old, volunteered to participate. The four executed focus groups lasted around 45 min each and were conducted during school hours. Students who did not participate in the focus groups followed regular classes.

Table 1 shows the division of students into different subgroups. The ninth graders involved comprised 55 students, divided into three subgroups named 9A, 9B, and 9C, each with their contact teacher. The contact teachers for groups 9A and 9B were involved in the research circle, and only students from these subgroups were included in the focus groups. The students of 9C were also given the opportunity to participate in the workday. The five students who carried out workdays were invited to the focus group, where three students participated.

Table 1 gives information on the gender division between the participating students, showing an even distribution between sexes. Issues of gender (or gender identification), though, were not in focus in this research. Instead, the purpose of the research project was to direct attention to how to increase students' awareness of opportunities for education an occupation, regardless of gender. Emilie, a girl from group 9B, participated in focus group 2 on workweek and focus group 4 on workday and is therefore counted twice.

The school administration obtained parents' consent to students participating in the focus groups. In collaboration with the teachers, time was allocated to conducting the focus groups. At the start of the focus groups, students were reminded that participation was voluntary. The author, as the leader of the research circle, conducted the focus groups. The other participants in the research circle switched roles as observers.

Focus groups were sound recorded and later transcribed. All students' names are anonymized to ensure students' privacy. For anonymization's sake, words characterized by dialect were rewritten. The transcripts from focus groups were the primary data for analysis. In total, 20 presentations were included (9 from subgroup 9B and 11 from subgroup 9B). The presentations were made in PowerPoint and consisted of many pictures and few descriptions or notes. These presentations were used as supplementary secondary data to validate or invalidate the interpretation of the primary data.

Analysis

The data analysis focussed on how the students' expectations, intentions, and experiences related to career learning across contexts were expressed in the focus groups. Attention was paid to the students' experiences of coherence in career

Table 1 Division of students, placement activities, gender company/organization in focus groups

Focus group	Placement activity	Subgroup	Name	Gender	Company/organisation
1	Workweek	9B	Magnus	Boy	Skiing patrol
			Anne	Girl	Hotel restaurant
			Hans	Boy	Movie company and hair salon
			Thea	Girl	Sports shop
			Erik	Boy	Municipality office
			Vilde	Girl	Architect office
			Otto	Boy	Grocery store
2	Workweek	9B	Pål	Boy	Electrician
			Anja	Girl	Tourist cabin
			Trond	Boy	Sports shop
			Henrik	Boy	Car repair shop
			Simen	Boy	Advertising agency
			Kenneth	Boy	Janitor services
			Nora	Girl	Kindergarten
			Emilie	Girl	Ski centre
3	Workweek	9A	Kristine	Girl	Restaurant
			Magnus	Boy	Groundwork company
			Stian	Boy	Restaurant
			Thomas	Boy	Grocery store
			Benedikte	Girl	Primary school
			Stella	Girl	Kindergarten
4	Workday	9C	Marie	Girl	Architect office
		9B	Emilie	Girl	Medical and care centre
		9A	Lise	Girl	Medical and care centre
Total			24	12 girls/12 boys	

learning. Moreover, to inquire into these aspects of career learning, necessary limitations relate to defining a phenomenon as a context for inquiry (Svensson, 2016). Thus, the studied phenomenon is how students' experience coherence in career learning regarding continuity and discontinuity in action or interaction, following boundary crossing theory.

Analyses were done in three phases. First, as an initial step, an inductive approach was used to understand and interpret the data, and as part of the collaborative learning process in the research circle, the participants read the transcripts of the focus groups together. Second, this researcher applied a contextual view of learning and analysed the data using a framework of four interrelated components (Bjerkholt et al., 2020). These components expand research into the meaning of learning about something (cognitivist) and learning to become something (constructivist) by looking into what is meaningful, thus contributing to the process of

learning from and with one another (Kindeberg, 2008). This part of the analysis is described below as a broad outline and adapted for the context of this study:

1. Material cause: What experiences, backgrounds, and expectations do the students bring into career education?
2. Formal cause: How are students' pre-understanding, experiences and intentions activated through career education?
3. Source of change: How do the students describe what is going on in career education, and what thoughts do they have about this?
4. Final cause: What meaning does career education have for students' actual learning?

The four components were used to understand the circumstances surrounding the phenomenon of coherence in career learning and to enrich the analysis of students' experiences. Moreover, this phase of analysis is characterized by an exploratory and expanding approach to pedagogical interaction and how this supports the learning process (Bjerkholt et al., 2020; Kindeberg, 2008). Third, the author discussed findings and interpretations with the participants in the research circle for validation and refinement purposes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This helped establish credibility in the research findings before the finalization of the analysis.

Applying a contextual approach (Svensson, 2016) combined with the analysis of the four interrelated causes gives an opportunity to elucidate different aspects of coherence in career learning through learning mechanisms identified in boundary crossing processes (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

Findings

Here, students' expectations, intentions, and experiences regarding coherence in career education are presented, focussing on continuity and discontinuity in learning across contexts as a space for emancipation. Elaborating on the possible influences of community interactions on personal motivation and educational relevance, findings are specified in three categories: individual trajectories, support and reflection, educational relevance. Some selected students' narratives functioned as an illustration of the general findings of the analysis of all the four focus groups and are presented in Table 2.

Individual trajectories

In this study, motivation and curiosity have been identified as essential prerequisites for learning through placement activities. Overall, the students had different personal aims for their respective placement activities, resulting in different learning trajectories. Individual trajectories create the background for different learning outcomes in gaining self-knowledge and knowledge of the world. The provision

Table 2 Findings presented through selected students' narratives

Name	Thomas	Anne	Magnus	Simen	Emilie
Placement activity	Workweek	Workweek	Workweek	Workweek	Workday
Company/organisation	Grocery store	Hotel kitchen	Groundwork company	Advertising agency	Medical and care centre
Individual trajectory	He hoped to get a summer job afterwards but had a frustrating experience	She was curious about working as a chef but was disappointed	Doesn't express a specific goal for workweek but enjoyed it. It was an experience in choosing a vocation	Had a great time	Aspiration to become a doctor was confirmed through workday
Support and reflection	Unanswered	Was supported by her teacher during the workweek. Wanted more information prior to workweek and follow up afterwards. Learned from other presentations	He learned help to write his CV and an application. He left out uninteresting things from his presentation. He learned from the other presentations	Unanswered	Missed the preparation for workday, felt unprepared Direct questions asked in focus group make her reflect on her learning process
Educational relevance	He thinks workweek was a single event, not relevant for schooling. But would like to visit more companies	She thinks work life and school have little to do with each other	He thinks that both at school and in work he learns new things. Once to learn more about what he needs in work life, at school	In workweek he got to learn about work life, irrelevant school experience	Learned about the educational trajectory to becoming a doctor. This motivates her for school

of placement activities thus created opportunities for developing individual career learning trajectories for these students.

The analysis showed that students' work placement experiences give insights into a variety of individual motives for participating in the placement activities. For example, Thomas, who spent his workweek at a grocery store, hoped to get a summer job at the store afterwards.

> But then… So I was really going to ask [about a job], so I chose to work as hard as I could. So I was really tired all the time because I worked hard, and then new goods came in all the time. But I chose to work hard, but then I kind of lost my motivation, because… especially at the end, the last day… I saw the boss once, and that was when I first came. And then after that, I did not see [the boss], so I could have skipped working, and just sit on the toilet and watch YouTube. (Transcript, Focus group 3, Thomas).

Here, Thomas described what was going on during the placement and his thoughts about this, identified as a source of change, and indicating his individual motivation and learning trajectory. This frustrating experience taught Thomas what it was like to work and gave him insights into the culture at this workplace. Anne presents a different trajectory, which, in the same way, becomes visible by identifying her source of change. She spent her workweek in the kitchen of a resort hotel, intending to verify her interest in becoming a chef. She expected to be able to do relevant tasks and learn something. However, she was set to do many simple, tedious tasks, such as cutting vegetables: "When it was busy in the kitchen, everyone forgot me" (her presentation). She expressed that the workers there could have been nicer to her and felt she had learned nothing. Anne did not experience support for her aspirations. The negative experience during the workweek made her decide not to study to become a chef after lower secondary school. The narratives of Thomas and Anne show their career learning progression, according to Law (1999)—from sensing information about these companies, sifting their points of view, to gaining a new understanding of the actions to take regarding their future.

Whilst students like Thomas and Anne had clear motives for applying for particular jobs during the workweek, others seemed to have few reflections on their motives. They adopted a go-with-the-flow approach to the school programme without expressing much personal interest, and they did not state whether they had a particular interest in the workplaces they visited during the workweek. However, their experiences gave them insights into what was required of a person in different work environments. Then there was Magnus, who visited a groundwork company for the workweek. He thought it would be fun to drive a truck all week, although he expressed that he would have liked to try different jobs, revealing his source of change: "[…] It would have been nice to try more [things]. I still do not know exactly what I want to be, because I think everything is just as fun" (Transcript, Focus group 3, Magnus). For Magnus, these short work-life experiences helped him gather information and figure out what would be the most fun vocation or education to pursue in the future.

The option of applying for a workday reveals other motives. All three students in focus group four gave detailed descriptions of the workday experience, indicating

an ample basis for career learning. For example, Emilie visited a combined nursing home and medical centre. She was curious and wanted to learn about what it was like working as a doctor. Talking to the doctors confirmed that this was the vocation she would like to pursue. Emilie gained support for her aspirations as she interacted with role models. She emphasized that the workday can be relevant for students interested and motivated to participate in the experience.

Through the lens of boundary crossing, this finding shows that career education through placement activities can facilitate meaningfulness through individual learning trajectories. Hence, continuity in career learning can be experienced as a biographical path connecting learning through various contexts and experiences.

Support and reflection

Analysis gave insight into importance of students' preparation before placement activities. Moreover, they highlighted the potential for individual and collective learning through reflections conducted after the placement activities. Sharing experiences in the focus groups also revealed a need for support after the placement activity. However, the amount of time spent on the class presentations and the assessments connected to the placement activities seemed to limit the time left for collective reflection in the classroom. Hence, not addressing reflections together after a presentation can seem like a missed opportunity for collective career learning.

The analysis reveals the students' need for support in preparing, executing, and reflecting on the placement activities meant to help them experience a transfer in their learning processes. First, students considered it relevant to write an application letter and CV and attend a job interview regarding preparation for the workweek. The students also expressed a need to know what to expect during the workweek. For example, Anne, who spent her workweek in a professional kitchen, was surprised that most of the kitchen staff spoke English. This stressed Anne, as she thought her English language skills were not so good. Another example came from Emilie, who had applied to visit a nursing home and medical centre for her workday. She was interested in exploring the work of general physicians there. However, spending a great deal of time with elderly people at the nursing home disappointed her. Therefore, having more information in advance could have better prepared the students for these experiences.

Second, during the execution of the workweek, the students were expected to document their experiences. They had questions from the question bank to which they should seek answers; they were also encouraged to document their work by taking photos and writing down notes. They expressed the need for support in conducting such school tasks whilst spending time at the workplace. This finding point towards the need for sufficient information and follow-up for the placement site manager, and the importance of finding a workplace suitable for students' needs.

Third, a considerable amount of time was allocated in the classrooms to allow the students to create and share their respective presentations on returning to school. In the focus groups, some students pointed out that it was helpful to reflect on their experiences during the workweek and that they learned about other kinds of work

through their classmates' presentations. Others, like Thomas, expressed that they had learned nothing from the activity. One student commented that she could not just recite the tedious tasks she performed during the workweek during her presentation. She had to present her experience of the workweek more interestingly and make it look better than it was, as the presentation was being graded. Thus, although the presentations expanded insights into the world of work for some, other experiences illustrated how graded school tasks could limit their space for personal reflections.

Additionally, sharing experiences in the focus groups showed a potential for collective reflection regarding the presentations held in class, but also revealed a need for support after the placement activity. Sharing their experiences added to their repertoire of information and contributed to further reflections on alternative perspectives. These reflections during focus groups illustrate rich grounds for collective processes in the classroom through the influence of community interactions. Moreover, the dialogue in the focus group contributed to reflection and support after the placement activity, i.e. the focus group dialogue allowed Emilie to reflect on the connection between school and work and what she had learned during the workday. She pointed to the need to talk to someone after workday about what they had done and what they had learned from the experience:

> Yes, it is easier when someone asks direct questions. When you talk about it with parents, it's a bit like, 'I did this, and I did this.' Whilst now, you ask more, like, 'What did you learn, actually'? (Transcript, Focus group 4, Emilie).

Emilie's reflection points towards the need for reflective questions to move from a focus on choice and suitability towards career learning. Such a reflective space could include reflection on social inequality. Accordingly, students in this study suggested having individual talks with a teacher before the class presentations. These suggestions can be understood as the students' need for further support as they reflect upon their experiences and learning process between the boundaries of school and work.

Finally, these findings confirm the importance of students' preparation before placement activities. Moreover, they highlighted the potential for individual and collective learning through reflections conducted after the placement activities. However, the amount of time spent on the class presentations and the assessments connected to the placement activities seemed to limit the time left for collective reflection in the classroom. In addition, more negatively loaded placement experiences seem to provide fertile grounds for further reflection. Hence, not addressing reflections together after a presentation can seem like a missed opportunity for collective career learning.

Educational relevance

This third finding elaborates on the possible influences of community interactions on personal motivation and educational relevance. The analysis elucidates how the placement activities gave insights into societal expectations students, as

individuals, have to meet after completing their education. In addition, the students' stories illustrate a criticism of a subject-specific school culture wherein students cannot grasp the connection between learning at school and actual tasks in working life.

First of all, the students described their experiences during the workweek/workday, which were mostly different from school, as a positive thing:

> Yes, many people whine about how at school you only learn math and such and not what you have to do later in life. Whilst here, you actually get to learn what to do afterwards and how it is. (Transcript, Focus group 2, Simen)

This quote describes the students' experienced relevance of placement activities. Furthermore, for many students, a connection between school and work life seemed to be a difficult concept to grasp or even absent. For example, in Magnus' experience, he considered workweek as being detached from school, although he thought there was some connection between the school assignments and the preparation, placement, and work on the presentation afterwards. However, he stated that he did not learn anything he could use at school and called for education that is more relevant to the world of work.

> […] We should have learned a little more about what you need in work life, at school. Where I was, I hardly needed anything—maybe the ability to talk, but that's really the only thing, I think. (Transcript, Focus group 3, Magnus)

Many other students agreed with Magnus and regarded the placement activities as standalone activities. In that regard, it was particularly interesting to note that these students' teachers made efforts to facilitate a reflection process on how school subjects were applied in work life. In the focus groups, students looked for signs of connection through the lens of school subjects, such as *Norwegian*, *English,* or *Mathematics.* Though they identified elements of the school subjects within the context of work, it did not seem easy to connect learning at school with the tasks performed in work life.

Whether it concerned workweeks or workdays, an interesting finding across the focus groups was the students' desire to experience more placement activities and see more of the world of work. Despite some students' frustrating experiences during the workweek, they still supported the idea of work experience programmes in school. The students expressed hope that they could eventually discover something about the world of work that was previously unknown to them and wished to gain more self-knowledge through different interactions.

Thus, the students' experiences can be understood as a criticism of a subject-specific school culture wherein students have difficulty grasping the connection between learning at school and tasks in working life. This points back to the aims of work experience activities in lower secondary school. Here, career education across contexts does not aim for sameness but attempts to explore the learning potential of discontinuity.

Discussion

This article examines students' career learning experiences across schools and the world of work as different contexts in Norwegian lower secondary schools. A problem is forwarded, related to the formalization of career education through a curriculum (Sultana, 2012). An integrated approach is suggested to strengthen the connection between career education and other aspects of the curriculum (Sultana, 2012; Vaughan, 2010). Previous studies have emphasized that placement activities should broaden students' horizons for education and vocation (Hatcher & Le Gallais, 2008; Plant, 2020; Poulsen et al., 2016; Skovhus & Poulsen, 2021).

This study shows that students can experience continuity in career learning through placement activities from a biographical perspective. Placement activities have been described as a meaningful process of getting to know more about oneself and different education and work trajectory opportunities. Through the lens of boundary crossing, the learning process can be described as identification, where "[t]he learning potential resides in a renewed sense making of different practices and related identities" (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 143). Regarding the new educational reform in Norway (Ministry of Education & Research, 2017), placement activities (particularly workdays) seem to open doors to the world of work for students. This points towards the potential of integrating a career learning curriculum in school, offering ample learning opportunities for widening students' horizons (Sultana, 2012; Vaughan, 2010; x, 2020). However, new perspectives on coherence in career learning and challenges in utilizing its emancipatory potential have been identified and are further discussed in the following section.

The pitfall of educationalizing

As part of this action research, efforts were made to strengthen coherence in career learning between school and the world of work. The analysis showed that students experienced preparation as a meaningful process in anticipating the discontinuity in action and interaction that emerges from sociocultural differences between school and the world of work (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011).

Moreover, teachers created tasks for the students during their placement (asking questions from the question bank, writing log, and more) and afterwards (class presentation at school, graded for oral Norwegian). By bringing schoolwork into the students' work experiences, these tasks can be identified as mediating artefacts coordinating for effortless movement of information on how school subjects were interwoven with the world of work (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p. 143). The aim was to increase students' exploration of reflective connections (Vaughan, 2010) and strengthen their motivation for schooling when they return to school.

Analysis of the students' experiences contributes with insights in the challenges when facilitating for reflection and motivation. First, analysis of students' experiences elucidates how using the question bank as a boundary object created new challenges. Second, it made some students more aware of the presence of school subjects within the world of work, to some degree; however, some struggled to see

the relevance of schooling upon returning from the placement activities. Third, students also voiced a discontinuity in the school tasks related to the placement experience, which was unintentional and not apparent to their teachers (nor to the other participants in the research circle, the article's author included) then. This analysis elucidates the challenges in facilitating for reflection and motivation, and it can be discussed whether the aim was achieved.

Reflection, as a learning mechanism at the boundary of contexts, relates to the potential of exploring differences in cultures, rules, and roles between practices at school and work (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). However, working on presentations after placement activities did not help the students deal with the challenges of taking on different roles or perspectives when moving between contexts. Furthermore, analysis shows that students were not entirely free to report and reflect on the true essence of their experiences without facing potential negative consequences regarding their grades. Thus, this school task may have influenced the students' reflections and hindered the potentially liberating effect of the placement experience. Instead, the students expressed the need for guidance and counselling during the follow-up, supporting them in reflection (Klindt Poulsen, 2020).

According to Bronkhorst and Akkerman, activities in out-of-school contexts are typically accompanied by an educational infrastructure, and "such attempts at modelling the out-of-school practice to resemble, match, or, extend school have another drawback, namely that such "educationalizing" limits the potential to provide a complementary or contradictory experience' (2016, p. 26). This analysis indicates that creating school tasks based on the subject-specific organization of the school seems to have hindered the coherence between the world of work and school. From a critical perspective, it may seem that intentions with the school tasks were to overcome the difference between school and the world of work, rather than overcoming discontinuities (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Moreover, a focus on educationalizing may have limited the students' freedom to reflect on their placement experiences, hindering genuine emancipation. This new knowledge implicates that the aim of exploring reflective connections and strengthening motivation can, in the future, be achieved by valuing the reflective nature of career education as distinguished from other curricular subjects, calling for a subject-specific approach to curriculum planning in *Educational Choice*.

The emancipatory potential of collective reflection

Community interaction in career education can encompass an emancipatory potential. However, as Law highlights, community interaction can "confirm the status quo or catalyse a change-of-mind" (1996, p. 37). Therefore, in this analysis, it is of interest to look for expressions that can elucidate emancipatory learning or the lack thereof.

Findings in this study elucidate the value of dialogue in focus groups, where a general exchange of experiences and learning outcomes occurred. This can be seen in contrast to the class presentations after the workweek, where there was little time for dialogue and reflection. Therefore, to help students experience

emancipation, the complexity of their positions and motives can be seen as a repertoire for career learning "because it is complexity which offers options, identifies causes and effects and enables autonomy" (Law, 2004, p. 53). Furthermore, the voices of these students illustrate the potential of collective reflection for placement activities to be considered meaningful, not just about one individual's choice but about career learning as a collective endeavour into the world of work.

Community interaction does not just relate to communities outside school but also to the community interaction experiences every student brings into the classroom. In a way, communities of classmates can create good arenas for sharing ideas about education and work (Klindt Poulsen, 2020). This would supply both students and teachers with a whole repertoire of diverse experiences for further reflection. Thus, the role of the teachers and career counsellors would be to help students "…have more than one way of conceiving of possible selves in possible futures" (Law, 1981, p. 22). In this study, the students' dialogues reveal an unexploited potential in maximizing this complexity of experiences represented in a classroom, school, or community to create dialogues that can expand students' points of view and awareness of possible futures. Such dialogues can lift career education beyond the narrow focus on career choice (Skovhus, 2018). Furthermore, career education can and should be a space for engaging students in discussions regarding their prerequisites, experiences, and discoveries when moving between the contexts that shape the ecology of their lives (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016). Through increased interaction in the community context, critical insights can contribute to framing experiences and connecting context-specific learning with practices from other contexts, contributing to reduce the reproduction of social-economic inequalities and challenge stereotype roles in employment (Messer, 2017). A collective turn to a didactical approach in career education seems to be called for by these students (Mariager-Anderson et al., 2020; Thomsen, 2017).

Limitations

Several limitations of the study warrant a discussion. First, focus groups 1, 2, and 3 were conducted a week after the presentation (a month after work week), and focus group 4 members were interviewed the day after their workdays. This may have influenced the students' experiences of connections in education regarding the workday.

Second, research on other subjects, through classroom observations, for example, could have provided direct insight into whether other teachers deliberately designed their teaching around the students' placement activities, where reflective connections with the learning experiences from different sites were welcomed.

Moreover, this article builds on the recognition that schools and the world of work—an out-of-school setting—do not reflect a fixed dichotomy. It is instead an analytic distinction. What defines schools is considered highly contextual.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by providing insights into the process of career learning across different contexts, from students' perspectives. Through learning mechanisms identified in boundary crossing processes (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), students' voices in this article elucidate dimensions of continuity and discontinuity in career learning. As part of this study, attempts were made to promote reflective connections when learning across contexts, and the students' experiences made the pitfall of educationalizing visible. The students confirmed the importance of making adequate preparations before proceeding with their placement activities. Moreover, the findings reveal the potential for individual and collective learning through reflection after the placement activities. They also indicate the unfulfilled potential of discontinuity as a source of career learning when moving across contexts, reflecting career education's aim.

Moreover, this study sheds light on the complicated challenges educational institutions encounter as they attempt to connect schools to out-of-school contexts. This entails meeting curriculum standards and discussing when and where an educational structure (and overlooking the specific properties of the world of work) can be more constructive (Bronkhorst & Akkerman, 2016, p. 28). Placement activities are administered not because of the sameness between the world of work and school but because of the differences between these contexts. The goal of career education across contexts is not to create seamless connections but to create a space for reflecting on tensions and contradictions in learning across these contexts.

The students also voiced a wish to discover the unknown world of work and called for relevant schooling to adequately prepare them for the future. For students to broaden their horizons to reduce drop-out and social inequality, career education holds the potential to fuel their reflective connections when learning between different contexts. When students expand their horizons for educational and vocational trajectories ('where they can be'), it also reflects on the relevance of 'where they are now' (school). Thus, this highlights "…the importance of both the entrapping and the liberating effects of learners' roles in their own neighbourhoods" (Law, 1996, p. 30). From a critical perspective, *Educational Choice* contributes to individualizing students' responsibility for their education and employability (Røise, 2020, p. 271). In that regard, it is relevant to ask how career education can contribute to students' liberation and emancipation by challenging their choices and learning processes. Following the call from Hatcher and Le Gallais (2008) to widen students horizons through ample work experiences, have these community interactions supported students in developing new points of view on work, role, and the self? The focus on educationalizing and the lack of reflection in the evaluation may have limited the liberating potential of developing more ways of understanding what is going on and exploring options to deal with it (Law, 2004).

This study and previous research show that systematic preparation for and reflection on career learning activities is much needed (Klindt Poulsen, 2020).

Following boundary crossing theory, career education can function as a transformed space for critical reflection and connection whilst maintaining the integrity of school and world of work as different contexts for career learning. Therefore, to achieve such a transformation, a clear didactic approach is needed to protect the uniqueness of the curriculum in *Educational Choice* and its potential to address misperceptions regarding the world of work, class, and gender issues. The discontinuity described by the students in this study can, and should, be at the core of career education. Otherwise, the main goal of career education would not be met.

Declarations

Conflict of interest No conflicts of interests to report.

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