




A broader educational and vocational outlook in compulsory education has consequences for social justice

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Abstract

This article explores a new approach to career education and career guidance activities within compulsory education, with a shift in focus from students' immediate choices to supporting curiosity and an open-minded expansion of horizons. Sen's concept of capability and approach to social justice plays a central role. A Danish project on career learning in compulsory school aimed to broaden perspectives on education and work among students in the final years (age 13–16) through experience-based learning and reflection activities. Concrete examples of 'what can be done' to develop a socially just practice in school-based career education and guidance are provided.

Keywords Capability · Career learning · Educational choice · Social justice · Career education · Career guidance

Résumé

Une perspective éducative et professionnelle plus large dans l'enseignement obligatoire a des conséquences sur la justice sociale

Cet article explore une nouvelle approche d'éducation au choix de carrière et d'orientation professionnelle dans le cadre de l'enseignement obligatoire, en mettant l'accent non plus sur les choix immédiats des élèves, mais sur le soutien à la curiosité et l'élargissement des horizons dans un esprit d'ouverture. Le concept de capacité de Sen et son approche de la justice sociale jouent un rôle central. Un projet danois sur l'apprentissage de carrière au sein de l'école obligatoire a visé à élargir les perspectives d'éducation et de travail des élèves de dernière année (13-16 ans) par le biais d'apprentissage basé sur l'expérience, ainsi que des activités de réflexion. Des

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exemples concrets de « ce qui peut être fait » pour développer une pratique socialement juste dans l'éducation et l'orientation professionnelle à l'école sont apportés.

Zusammenfassung

Eine breitere Bildungs- und Berufsperspektive in der obligatorischen Schule hat Konsequenzen für die soziale Gerechtigkeit

Dieser Artikel untersucht einen neuen Ansatz für die Berufsbildung und die Berufsberatungsaktivitäten im Rahmen der obligatorischen Schule, mit einer Verlagerung des Schwerpunkts von den unmittelbaren Entscheidungen der Schüler auf die Unterstützung von Neugier sowie einer breiten Horizonterweiterung. Sens Konzept des Befähigungsansatzes sowie des Ansatzes der sozialen Gerechtigkeit spielen dabei eine zentrale Rolle. Ein dänisches Projekt über berufliches Lernen in der obligatorischen Schule zielte darauf ab, die Perspektiven auf Bildung und Arbeit bei Schülerinnen und Schülern in den letzten Jahren (Alter 13-16) durch erfahrungsbasiertes Lernen und Reflexionsaktivitäten zu erweitern. Konkrete Beispiele dafür, "was getan werden kann", um eine sozial gerechte Praxis in der schulischen Berufsbildung und -beratung zu entwickeln, werden gegeben.

Resumen

Una perspectiva educativa y profesional más amplia en la educación obligatoria tiene consecuencias para la justicia social

Este artículo explora un nuevo enfoque educativo de la orientación para la carrera en el marco de la educación obligatoria, con un cambio de enfoque que ha girado desde la atención a las elecciones inmediatas de los estudiantes hacia la curiosidad y la ampliación de horizontes utilizando una actitud de apertura. El concepto que Sen propone sobre la capacidad y su aproximación a la justicia social juega un papel central. Un proyecto danés sobre el aprendizaje de habilidades para carrera en la escuela obligatoria tenía como objetivo ampliar las perspectivas que los estudiantes en los últimos cursos (13-16 años) tienen sobre la educación y el trabajo, mediante actividades de aprendizaje basadas en la experiencia y en la reflexión. Se proporcionan ejemplos concretos de "lo que se puede hacer" para desarrollar en la escuela una práctica socialmente justa basada en la educación y orientación profesional.

Introduction

In key European policy papers, career guidance is linked to lifelong learning and is considered crucial in efforts to equip European citizens to take an active part in an ever-changing society throughout their lives. Effective career guidance is given a central role in promoting work-life balance, encouraging active citizenship, reducing social inequality and matching the needs of the labor market (Council of the European Union, 2002, 2004, 2008; European Parliament, 2000). Career education and career guidance in schools is part of more comprehensive career guidance strategies. This article explores career education and career guidance at the lower secondary level—what is in focus and what are the consequences.

During the period 2001–2003, the OECD and the European Commission conducted a comprehensive review of national career guidance policies in 32 countries. For each country, a review assessed 'how the organisation, management and delivery of career guidance services contribute to the implementation of lifelong learning and active labour market policies' (OECD, 2004, p. 3). Cross-cutting these national reviews, the OECD presented a number of principal findings. Among other things, it is stressed that 'Too often services fail to develop people's career management skills, but focus upon immediate decisions' (OECD, 2004, p. 3). A little more than ten years later, a group of Norwegian researchers found that the majority of guidance practitioners at upper secondary schools (for students aged 16–19) regard supporting students in choosing their next educational step as the primary objective of the guidance and counselling they provide. They also found that most students consider career guidance primarily as something intended to help them choose their next step within the educational system (Haug et al., 2016, pp. 31–32).

Skovhus has found the same to be true in Denmark—in terms of both policy and practice. In the Danish legislation governing career guidance in schools, the main focus is on ensuring that it helps students in making educational and vocational choices, improves course completion rates and reducing dropout, and helps students seek out and use relevant information. Furthermore, career guidance should ensure that the individual student develops a realistic understanding of requirements in terms of skills and qualifications within education and in the labour market (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2020b, Sect. 1). An additional purpose of career guidance is to support reflection on one's own competences, potentials and possibilities regarding education and career (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2020c, Sect. 3). When compared to the understanding of the role of career guidance expressed in the European policy papers, the Danish legislation represents a narrower approach (Skovhus, 2018, pp. 41–42).

In her research on career education and career guidance during the final years of lower secondary education (grades 8–10, students aged 13–17), Skovhus found that, in career guidance practice and in the students' perceptions of the role of career guidance, there is a huge focus on the students' imminent choice of education. This focus is, for instance, apparent in the ways that guidance practitioners and teachers present career guidance and career education at school, and in how guidance activities are explained and conducted. Guidance practitioners and teachers may, to some degree, have a broader understanding of potential applications and contributions of guidance activities, such as challenging hierarchies of status among different types of education. Nevertheless, it would seem that such views are rarely clearly articulated and that students therefore remain unaware and/or do not consider them important (Skovhus, 2018, p. 261). Any broader perspectives on the possible roles and applications of career guidance and career education seem to receive little or no attention.

In Danish schools, teachers are responsible for the provision of career education activities in grades 0–9 under the topic of 'Education and Jobs' (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2020a, Sect. 7). Meanwhile, studies indicate that this topic is not taught at many schools (DEA, 2012). In grades 8 and 9, as well as the optional grade 10, guidance professionals provide career guidance regarding

the transition from compulsory lower secondary education to vocational or general upper secondary education or to full-time work (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2020b). This career guidance is supposed to build on the knowledge and skills the students have acquired in the aforementioned Education and Jobs lessons in order to help them make informed and qualified choices (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2020b, Sect. 6). A number of mandatory career guidance activities are outlined in the legislation governing career guidance in lower secondary education. Examples include an introduction to processes and procedures for the transition to vocational or general upper secondary education; an introduction to the various vocational and general upper secondary programmes; and information meetings for students and parents (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2020c, Sect. 4). Another example of a mandatory activity is taster programmes. All 8th grade students visit two vocational or general upper secondary programmes. These visits are spread across two or three days. It is mandatory for all students to visit at least one vocational programme (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2019, Sect. 1). In grade 9, students who have been assessed 'not ready for vocational or general upper secondary education' or are undecided as to what they want to do next are offered additional opportunities to visit general or vocational upper secondary programmes (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2019, Sect. 5). For students attending the optional grade 10, participation in taster programmes is mandatory and, as in grade 8, it is also mandatory that they visit at least one vocational programme (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2019, Sect. 7). As outlined in the legislation, the taster programmes are intended to allow students to experience different study environments and both practical and theoretical elements of educational and training programmes. It is stated that the taster programmes should both challenge and qualify students' choice of upper secondary programme (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2019, Sect. 1 + 3).

In her qualitative research on career guidance in lower secondary education, Skovhus found that students generally value career activities if they are in line with their existing sphere of interest and when they have not yet decided on their choice of education. Once students feel they have decided upon their choice of education, the majority find participation in career guidance activities such as taster programmes irrelevant. Focusing mainly on imminent choice of education seems to diminish students' engagement in activities they do not regard as meaningful in relation to this choice. As such, rather than encouraging students' curiosity and reflection with regard to education, jobs, the labour market, possibilities and values, the focus within career guidance and career education on choosing an educational pathway often seems to have the opposite effect (Skovhus, 2016, 2018, p. 263).

Some of the guidance activities within lower secondary education, such as taster programmes, seemed to be seen as isolated events by students, rather than part of a coherent programme of career guidance and career education. There was no preparation or follow-up in class that might have helped students relate these activities to the choices they faced and supported their reflection on career-related matters, for instance by encouraging systematic reflection on how they saw themselves in relation to various educational and vocational options. In this way, much of the potential

of such activities would seem to remain unexploited (Skovhus, 2018, p. 176). When working with mandatory guidance activities for which the timing is structurally determined rather than based on the individual student's decision-making process, it would seem to be crucial that an effort is made to ensure that activities without a direct link to the student's individual decision-making processes are not experienced as meaningless (Skovhus, 2018).

The research and development project 'Insights and outlooks: Career learning in the final years of compulsory school' [in Danish: *Udsyn i udskoling*] addresses the problems Skovhus identified—namely that many career guidance activities in lower secondary school appear to be isolated events with no preparation or support for follow-up reflection in class, and that many students struggle to see the relevance of such activities once they have chosen an educational pathway or if the activity does not appear relevant to the options they are considering (Skovhus, 2018). The aim of the *Insights and outlooks* project was to broaden perspectives on education and the world of work among students in the final years of compulsory education before they decide upon their next step through career learning activities rooted in experience-based learning and reflection. The project includes an explicit focus on activities where preparation and reflection are incorporated as integral components. Preparation and reflection are framed in terms of a focus on what the students can discover, experience and learn about different educational programmes, the world of work and themselves (Poulsen, 2020; Poulsen et al., 2016). The *Insights and outlooks* project provides the empirical basis for this article.

The article's authors set out to explore the consequences of a new approach to planning, conducting and evaluating career education and career guidance activities within compulsory education. This new approach involves a shift in focus from primarily being concerned with students' immediate choice of educational pathway, instead focusing on supporting students' curiosity and an open-minded approach to education and work and on expanding their horizons. Sen's concept of capability and approach to social justice play a central role in our analysis and discussion of the potential benefits of such a change in focus.

Career education and career guidance in Danish schools

In Denmark, there are ten years of compulsory education. Children attend school in grades 0–9 (from the age 5/6 until 15/16) and can then choose to attend an optional grade 10.

In grade 9 or grade 10, students have to decide whether to enrol in a programme of vocational or general upper secondary education or continue into full-time work. Vocational education provides professional qualifications while general upper secondary education provides qualifications for entering higher education. The students have to be assessed 'ready for education' in order to continue into vocational or general upper secondary education. Municipal youth guidance centers assess the extent to which the students have the academic, vocational, personal and social competencies to begin and complete an upper secondary education. The general upper

secondary route is generally seen as having higher status than the vocational route (Dyssegaard et al., 2014; Egedal, 2015, 2017).

As mentioned above, Danish schools are responsible for providing career education activities in within a topic called ‘Education and Jobs’ (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2020a, Sect. 7). In grades 8 and 9, as well as the optional grade 10, guidance professionals from the municipal youth services [*den kommunale ungeindsats*] provide career guidance regarding the transition from compulsory lower secondary education to vocational or general upper secondary education or to full-time work (Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Education], 2020b).

In Denmark, education is free—compulsory education, vocational and general upper secondary education, and higher education (including university). The career guidance provided to students in schools and other parts of the education system is also free of charge.

Analytical framework: capability approach

The article’s analytical framework is Sen’s capability approach. Sen emphasises that development can be seen ‘as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy’. Focusing on human freedoms, Sen argues, ‘contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product’, with technological advance, or with the rise in personal incomes or personal achievements and successes. Growth of GNP or in personal incomes can be important *means* to expand the freedoms of citizens. But applying Sen’s understanding of development as the expansion of freedom means concentrating on the overarching objective and not merely on means such as salary and GNP—these can play an important role in the process of expanding freedom but they are not *ends* in themselves (Sen, 1999, p. 3).

The agency of the individual is closely linked to the social arrangements in the society he or she live in. The individual freedom of agency is supported or constrained by the social, political and economic opportunities available to humans. In this sense, to support development, it is important to focus on ‘the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency’ (Sen, 1999, p. xii).

Equality and social justice are at the heart of Sen’s thinking. Sen points out that most recent theories on social justice argue for equality in relation to *something*, where this something varies, e.g. income or rights (Sen, 1992). The critical question, according to Sen, is not whether equality is necessary, but ‘equality of what?’ Sen’s answer to this question is equality of capability, which is defined as ‘a person’s actual ability to do the different things that she values doing’ (Sen., 1999, p. 253). The expansion of people’s capabilities is the basic building block in analyses of development (Sen, 1999, p. 18).

Applying the capability approach, the focus is on human lives and not just on the goods people possess or have access to. Sen stresses that by shifting the focus from

the means of living to the actual opportunities people have, the capability approach represents a radical change in the evaluative work on justice (Sen, 2009, p. 253).

According to Sen, the freedom to choose is an intrinsic value, since ‘being able to reason and choose is a significant aspect of human life’ (Sen, 2009, p. 18). Freedom is valuable because more freedom gives a person more opportunity to pursue his or her objectives. Another important perspective concerns the process of choice, for instance that ‘we are not being forced into some state because of constraints imposed by others’ (Sen, 2009, p. 228).

Sen points out that human choices are not made in isolation, but influenced by the individual’s social environment and material and non-material circumstances; likewise, people’s ideas of what constitutes a good life and what is valuable are profoundly influenced by family, community, cultural ties, background etc. (Robeyns, 2005, p. 102; Unterhalter et al., 2007, p. 5). It is therefore relevant to focus on school-based career education and career guidance as one aspect of students’ social environment and circumstances.

An important question is whether a person has genuine opportunity for exercising his or her capabilities—for example, if people face sanction from their social environment for making certain choices (Robeyns, 2005, p. 102). In terms of the topic of this article, such a question might be whether a student choosing an educational pathway that he or she is familiar with and values highly continues to receive the recognition and acceptance of his or her social environment.

The capability approach does not only advocate expanding and evaluating human capabilities; it emphasises the importance of examining the context and whether the circumstances in which people choose between different capabilities are enabling and just (Robeyns, 2005, pp. 98–102). As such, the process that leads to a choice, for instance when choosing an educational pathway, and the context in which this choice is made are as important to Sen as the choice itself.

Insights and outlooks: the empirical basis for the article

The research project ‘Insights and outlooks: Career learning in the final years of compulsory education’ forms the empirical basis for this article. *Insights and outlooks* addresses the problems identified by Skovhus (2018) in her research within lower secondary education. First that, rather than encouraging students’ curiosity and expanding their horizons regarding educational and vocational opportunities, focusing primarily on students’ imminent choice of education in career education and career guidance practice can have the opposite effect. And second that many career activities within compulsory education are treated as isolated events with no preparation and no support for students’ subsequent reflection (Skovhus, 2018).

Insights and outlooks focuses on the process leading up to the student’s choice of education. The project’s overall aim was to contribute to the development of methods and frameworks that allow all students in the final years of compulsory education (grades 7–9, age 13–16) to encounter and experience different upper secondary programmes and to reflect on these experiences.

The overall project comprised 13 local projects, covering 17 different schools nationwide, approximately 65 classes, 1400 pupils and 70 teachers. In addition, more than 70 local companies, a large number of institutions providing vocational and upper secondary education and numerous youth guidance counsellors took part (Poulsen, 2020). During the *Insights and outlooks* project, the professionals in the local projects developed a range of activities aimed at expanding students' educational and vocational experiences and reflections and encouraging and supporting curiosity, exploration and community thinking about educational and vocational opportunities. In both the overall and the local projects, there was a focus on changing the didactic perspective from activities supporting students' educational choices to activities creating a broader educational and vocational outlook and a widening of opportunities among students. Additionally, there was a great deal of focus on ensuring a thorough and carefully considered preparation for activities followed by meticulous processing of students' experiences and the information they received, for example after visiting a vocational college. In this way, what happens both before and after the concrete activity was prioritised and emphasised when planning the career learning activities in the local projects.

Examples of local projects developed in *Insights and outlooks* include: Visits to local businesses presenting a broad range of job opportunities in the community; presentations by parents of their educational background and career; an innovation project in partnership with a local vocational college providing on-site training, guidance, and project work; presentations by students at local upper secondary schools; and visits to two large companies where students interviewed employees (Poulsen et al., 2016, 2018, p. 218).

The research we conducted in relation to the *Insights and outlooks* project set out to explore how students and teachers responded to the change in focus within career activities towards a broadening of students' educational and vocational horizons and supporting curiosity and exploration. This led to the following research question: How do pupils experience the encounter with career learning activities in concrete educational and vocational contexts, and how do pupils and teachers respond when taking part in such activities?

This research question was researched using qualitative methods. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 randomly selected students from grades 7–9, 6 teachers and 12 collaborators from outside school, representing career guidance centres, vocational colleges, general upper secondary school, parents and local companies, all involved in the local projects (Poulsen et al., 2016, pp. 128–132).

In the following, we analyse and discuss empirical data drawn from this qualitative study. The qualitative data has been analysed thematically; the theoretical framework has been Sen's concept of capability, and from this starting point the authors have read through the interviews, discovered themes associated with capability-thinking across the material and grouped them in broader thematic fields that are presented in the analysis.

Analysis and discussion

With its focus on freedom, the capability approach does not only emphasise *what* people achieve and are successful at, but also their actual freedom to choose between different types of life. Freedom of choice contributes to well-being, but is also of intrinsic value (Sen, 2009, p. 18). One aspect of freedom concerns opportunities for pursuing one's goals and desires and achieving the things one values highly. Another aspect involves the process leading up to a choice and is concerned with possibilities for choosing between different things one values doing. Here, the point of interest is how the individual arrives at 'the culmination situation' (Sen, 2009, p. 230); for instance, how a student arrives at a particular choice of educational pathway. With a narrow understanding of freedom, it is sufficient to focus on the outcome—that the student chooses an educational pathway that he or she is satisfied with and can carry through. However, if one draws inspiration from Sen's underlining of the importance of opportunities and freedom of choice, it is necessary to focus on the process leading up to this choice and on the individual's actual opportunities for choosing between different 'valued lives' and not only on what is chosen. Seen in this light, it is vital to work to ensure that guidance activities create opportunities for learning and reflection and give young people a chance to choose other things they value doing. Developing a broad and well-reflected foundation for making educational choices is just as important as the choice itself when applying the capability approach.

Sen does not only advocate expanding people's capabilities, that is their 'actual ability to do the different things that she values doing' (Sen, 2009, p. 253). He also emphasises the importance of context and of the circumstances in which people make choices based on their capabilities being supportive and just. This points to the crucial role of that which precedes the choice being made. This is one reason why it is both relevant and interesting to focus on teaching and guidance as elements of a student's world and thereby part of their context, and to discuss the role played by teaching and guidance from a social justice perspective.

The local projects in *Insights and outlooks* had very different foci and activities. Some focused on developing personal and social skills, others on how school subjects could contribute to career learning (e.g. relocating math classes to local VET-schools). Others again focused on work experience and made partnerships with local companies that included visits to the companies and job shadowing or visits from former students, parents and others with ties to the labour market to the school. Most of the projects included taster programmes in institutions offering upper secondary programmes. As a result, students were offered an insight into various jobs and educational programmes and learnt about working life in a more general sense.

The project's activities thereby give students a broader perspective on their educational and vocational opportunities. As one girl puts it: 'I mean, I basically think, because we were part of this... it's opened my eyes. Before, it was just like, I thought stewardess and then I didn't think about other jobs. But when we had this *Insights and outlooks* thing, it opened my eyes to these different

possibilities... I found out there was quite a lot of possibilities and that wasn't all there is [...] I've always thought agricultural consultancy, that sounds like it must really suck. Like, farming, no one wants to do that, but it was kind of fascinating, so I thought, well—that's also something I'd like to do' (Girl, grade 7).

If, as Sen argues, people should have the opportunity to choose between the different things that they value doing (Sen, 2009, p. 253), it requires them actually being aware of the various options. In relation to our study, this means being aware of and reflecting on the existence of different educational and vocational options. As is apparent from the girl's statement above, students do not automatically become aware of the existence of educational and vocational options beyond those they have already picked out. It would therefore seem necessary, at school and in career education and career guidance, to develop a systematic approach for creating a broader outlook. There is also evidence to suggest that such a systematic approach can successfully contribute to broadening students' educational and vocational horizons.

That students encounter and reflect on educational and vocational options they were previously unaware of helps expand their educational and vocational capabilities. However, it is impossible for schools and guidance services to provide concrete experience with and support reflection on *all* educational and vocational options. Seen in this light, it can be argued that much of what can be gained in terms of expanding students' capabilities through a systematic approach focusing on real-world experience and reflection regarding education and jobs (as in *Insights and outlooks*) involves making them aware of the fact that their knowledge and experience, and thereby their considerations when choosing a pathway, are limited to a tiny sliver of the rich tapestry of educational and vocational options. In Sen's terms, the students become aware of their own relatively narrow capabilities in relation to education and work and realise that the world of work is much bigger than they had previously thought and were aware. They become interested in and experience being able to manage their own curiosity and expand their capabilities.

In the interviews, many students express that, as well as supporting a broader perspective in terms of the different educational programmes and jobs that exist, the activities in the *Insights and outlooks* project helped expand their horizons in terms of their own educational and vocational options. A girl with dyslexia took part in a theme week with her class focusing on workplaces in the school's immediate vicinity. Activities included visits to local companies, presentations by parents, visits by former students currently enrolled in upper secondary education and various exercises focused on reflection on these activities. Like the other students, this girl says that the activities helped her gain new knowledge about educational programmes and about numerous jobs she had not previously been aware of. She continues: 'after discovering I was dyslexic in grade 4, I was really worried about what I could do in terms of education [...] because I enjoy working with stuff where I don't have to race about; I want to be able to sit down and think about things and take my time. But it was tricky when you're not a very good reader [...] My dyslexia is a big part of my everyday life and I worry about the kind of education I can get. Because when you find out you're dyslexic, you give up'. She also states that the week they spent on *Insights and outlooks* activities has inspired her to consider a number of different

jobs, whereas she previously felt locked into a single programme and a single job (Girl with dyslexia, grade 7).

The quoted passage shows that the girl has spent several years reflecting on who she is and the difficulties she faces and had concluded that, due to her dyslexia, she had very limited opportunities. Applying Sen's approach, it can be said that she felt she had a highly limited set of capabilities.

Drawing on the capability approach, it can be concluded that the opportunity to choose between different highly valued alternatives is not only dependent on students *knowing about* different educational programmes and jobs. The students must also feel that the educational programmes and jobs they know about are *genuine options*. Through the activities in the *Insights and outlooks* project, the girl became aware that she personally has a wide range of options within the educational system and on the labour market—options she may already have been aware of, but had not previously considered realistic possibilities for her personally. Hope seems to play a role in this in the sense that activities and reflection processes she has participated in have helped create a well-founded hope that she can choose between a number of valued options en route to building a future doing something she values. In this way, it would seem that hope becomes a factor that affects people's understanding of their own capability set and a factor that can have an impact on people's actions when choosing between these capabilities.

A number of students talk about having predominantly negative notions and prejudices regarding vocational education before they visited a vocational college. This is related to the fact that, in Denmark, vocational education and training is generally considered of low prestige compared to general upper secondary education, making the latter the preferred choice among both young people and parents (Dyssegaard et al., 2014; Egedal, 2017). The students' stories show how ideas expressed in everyday communication, whether explicitly or implicitly, can influence the pathways young people regard as highly valued and as realistic options. A student's understanding of and opinions on a particular educational programme have an impact on others too. The students (and the teachers, guidance professionals etc.) produce the environment that they are all part of, and this plays a role in terms of how easy, or how difficult, they find it to choose between their set of capabilities.

This is apparent in the following.

A student who gets good marks at the lower secondary level wants to enrol in a vocational programme after completing grade 9. He explains that he often encounters surprise when telling others of his plans and finds he has to defend his choice of educational pathway. As he puts it: 'Quite often I am asked "Why? You have the marks. So why are you not going to [general] upper secondary school?" But that is not what I want. I really want a vocational education where I can also use my hands, because that is what I really want [to do]. But then they are like, "What? You cannot be serious!" They think that, especially when you have good marks, you have to use them. They do not think that you are using them if you choose a vocational education' (Boy, grade 7). The boy's words draw attention to the fact that ideas and understandings regarding different educational programmes and jobs are produced and maintained in social contexts. As such, a person's understandings regarding a particular educational programme do not only affect that person and his or

her deliberations on choice of education. These understandings also form part of the environment in which other young people have to make educational choices and can thereby affect others' sense of possible options. In other words, the environment a student helps create via his or her understandings, opinions and statements, for example in school, affects other students' sense of their own real set of capabilities and how easy or difficult it is for them to choose between them.

A systematic approach can be taken to challenging students' understandings, prejudices and stereotypes. A number of the local projects that were part of *Outlooks and insights* work with vocational colleges to overcome prejudices about vocational education. In one local project, the students spent four days at a VET college in two different departments, where they had to make a tangible product related to their subjects at school. The teacher who accompanied the students responds to a question about whether any of them acted in surprising ways: 'Yes, actually the students also surprised each other, because several of the academically stronger students found it a real challenge when they were handed a tool, while for many of the others, it was basically the other way around. And several of the strong students said that they would never be capable of becoming a carpenter. And I think that's really cool, that it makes them think like that, because then they acknowledge the job more than they had done before, I think.' (Teacher). The students get a concrete insight into what a vocational upper secondary programme actually requires, and that there are things that are challenging and that one must be good at in order to complete a vocational education. The activities focused on expanding students' horizons concerning education and jobs help develop new and more balanced understandings. This 'massages' the status of vocational programmes and changes the way students think and talk about the various programmes they visit.

In the interviews, some of the students describe how their participation in career activities as part of the *Insights and outlooks* project has helped them discuss education and jobs with their parents and changed the way they talk to their parents about such things. A female grade 7 student participated in a series of career activities comprising visits to local companies and guest presentations in class by parents and company representatives. She states that she feels she has become better at arguing her case when discussing the world of work with her mother. A male student tells that he has taken part in a project where students worked as journalists, were visited by representatives from the maritime education and training programmes, visited an education fair and worked with logbooks using a tablet. He describes how he feels that he feels that he discusses the world of work with his parents much more now than he had done previously: 'We talk about it a lot more... almost every time we eat [dinner together], jobs come up. All kinds of different jobs, which languages are required and stuff'.

The students' responses point towards the fact that the potential of activities such as those in *Insights and outlooks* extends beyond changing the concrete settings and circumstances at school for students and teachers participating in the project. The project's activities also seem to have an impact on the student's home lives and interactions with their families. When, in line with Sen's approach, the focus is on ensuring the contexts and circumstances in which people choose among their capabilities are stimulating and just, it is interesting to note that the students' family contexts can

also be affected by activities centred on creating a broader educational and vocational outlook and expanding students' opportunities.

The activities performed as part of school-based career education and guidance, as well as family and home life, are important parts of the context in which students make educational choices. The capability approach highlights that what is going on prior to this choice is crucial—at school, in career guidance settings and at home. Applying Sen's perspectives on freedom, capabilities and social justice, the various quoted passages from students draw attention to the fact that, when we advocate for students being given the opportunity to choose between various educational and vocational pathways they value, this opportunity is dependent on them being aware of different educational programmes and jobs. However, it is also dependent on them feeling that they would actually be capable of performing these jobs and successfully completing programmes. Finally, it is also dependent on students feeling that various educational programmes receive social recognition and that they would be seen as equally worthy of recognition if making this choice as if choosing another pathway. It is important to note that for an educational programme to be seen as an option, it hereby involves a lot more than mere awareness of its existence. The teacher's responses also draw attention to that school and guidance settings can work to shape the ways students—and sometimes also teachers, other educational professionals and parents—view various educational programmes. In this way, an effort is made to change the context in which students make educational choices in the sense that the activities influence what the students consider possible choices and expand the breadth of students' options—potentially increasing the students' capabilities in relation to education and jobs.

Discussion

The analysis indicates that a change of perspective in terms of career education activities at school—from focusing mainly on students' imminent choice of educational pathway to focusing on widening their educational and vocational horizons—seems to support students' development of capabilities; that is, it broadens the range of options that students regard as actually available to them. When viewed in terms of Sen's insights, this increased freedom of choice has consequences for social justice.

In discussions of social justice, the focus is often on social mobility within education, understood as 'the relative chance to begin and complete an educational programme at a higher level than one's parents when comparing young people with different social backgrounds' (Mattsson & Munk, 2008, p. 9: our translation from the original Danish). Whether politically, among researchers or in the public discourse, there has been a focus on educational mobility for many years (Munk, 2009). The analyses in this article, inspired by Sen, help nuance this discussion, highlighting the importance of efforts to expand the space of valued options. Applying this perspective, it is important that educational mobility cuts both ways—for instance that young people whose parents have an academic background view vocational programmes as genuine and valued options.

Our research does not reveal anything about the actual choices of post-compulsory education the students made (typically) one, two or three years after the end of the project. Based on our findings, we ask whether there is a need for extended and coherent action—perhaps beginning earlier than grade 7—if students are to experience a genuine expansion of their educational and vocational capabilities and to find it easier to choose among their set of capabilities. Research in this area would be welcome.

Graham and Harwood warn against a naive approach to the capability approach, because it can raise the temptation ‘to focus simply on building the individual capacity of students without recognising what structural and political barriers impede their participation’ (Graham & Harwood, 2011, p. 137). The *Insights and outlooks* project was organized in such a way as to reduce such risk of individualisation. The project’s activities are targeted at all students and work with the communities they belong to. As such, the project is not organised with an individual focus, for instance on students deemed as in need of ‘special support’, thereby avoiding the risk of individualising problems rooted at the societal level inherent in such a focus on the individual and with efforts to build the capacities of individuals. It is also worth mentioning that students who might need ‘special support’ do receive this support, but do so through communal activities rather than being singled out and categorised as different.

It has been pointed out that, when working with the capability approach, there has been a tendency to focus on individuals while disregarding structural limitations (Bonai & Tarabini, 2014; Navarro, 2000). Here, it is important not to overlook that students are not only embedded in school and family contexts, but in a broader historical, social and material world with the various power structures this implies (Lave & Packer, 2008, p. 25). Young people’s experience of their capabilities in terms of which educational programmes they consider relevant and genuine options is intertwined with societal structures, such as the possibility of finding a suitable work placement for acquiring a vocational qualification or the geographical location of institutions providing vocational or general upper secondary education.

Our analysis of the *Insights and outlooks* project, inspired by the capability approach, does not address questions regarding structural limitations, for instance the lack of suitable work placements and the geographical location of educational institutions. That is not to say that we do not recognise the importance of societal structures. Moreover, it is not to say that the primary responsibility for creating more suitable work placements, for example, lies with teachers and career guidance practitioners; indeed they have no control over policy or public investment. Broadening outlooks and expanding opportunities for young people is a complex task that must be undertaken on multiple levels, including a societal level, via policy, and an everyday level in schools.

With this article, we wanted to focus on everyday practice and analyse how applying a different perspective, such as the one developed as part of the *Insights and outlooks* project, impacts students. Our analysis using Sen’s capability approach suggests that there are implications for social justice.

Irving points out that career guidance practitioners are not familiar with the concept of social justice (Irving 2015). If the focus on social justice is to lead to changes

in practice, then operationalising social justice in the form of guidance practices is an important and major task (McMahon et al. 2008, p. 22). Hooley (2015, p. 13) emphasises that practitioners are right in pointing out that, despite growing interest in this area, we must continue to address the question, ‘What is to be done?’.

Our Sen-inspired analysis demonstrates how concrete changes in perspective when planning and conducting career education activities, focusing on stimulating educational and vocational curiosity and reflection among students, has social justice implications for these students. Concrete examples are given of ‘what can be done’ to develop socially just career education and guidance practices at the lower secondary level.

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