

# Teachers in Danish upper secondary education's conceptualisation of career learning: A Koselleck inspired study

**Laura Cordes Felby**

Aarhus University, Denmark.

**Randi Boelskifte Skovhus**

VIA University College, Denmark.

## For correspondence:

Laura Cordes Felby: [lcf@au.dk](mailto:lcf@au.dk)

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## Abstract

This study explores the translation and negotiation of career learning as a newly introduced concept in the context of academic Danish upper secondary education, shedding light on teachers' understanding of the concept and its connection to their teaching practice. In the study, we draw on observations and interviews with ten teachers. Using Koselleck's asymmetric counter concepts, the analysis shows that the negotiation of meaning is complex, and full of internal and external paradoxes. Last, the study argues that in practice, there is goodwill and a desire to occupy the concept by the teachers when it can be linked to meaningful teaching practice.

**Key words:** Denmark; career learning; career education; school

## Introduction

Across many nations, schools and educational programmes are preoccupied with supporting students to develop life paths to benefit themselves and society. In Denmark, specifically, there is an overall desire to support students to gain insight into the world, develop democratic values, understand themselves in a societal context, and develop a foundation that supports them to progress in the education system, in the labour market and in life as a whole. In addition, there is also political attention to young people to make educational choices that address society's need for labour.

Recently career learning was implemented as an educational theme or concept across all academic upper secondary education programmes (approximately age 16-20). This was introduced during a comprehensive educational reform in 2017. In government policy papers related to the educational reform, different rationales and arguments were articulated concerning the integration of career learning (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2022; Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2016):

- to develop students' career competencies,
- to strengthen their academic and vocational development,
- to strengthen their formation and general education (the German term *Bildung*).

Prior to the educational reform in 2017, career learning was not articulated as an educational theme in any policy papers related to academic upper secondary education. However, after 2017, the different academic upper secondary education programmes were required to integrate career learning into the curriculum across all subject fields.

The success of such an educational reform lies largely in the teachers' knowledge and willingness to integrate it into their teaching practice. Here, the teachers' understanding, and narratives play a central role (Linné, 2015). The main research interest in this study is how teachers in academic upper secondary education understand the concept of career learning in a secondary school context. The study examines the following research questions:

- How do teachers in academic upper secondary education programmes understand and occupy the concept of career learning as a new educational concept?
- How does their understanding relate to a desire to maintain a meaningful teaching practice?

## Concepts in the field of career guidance

In theory and practice, career studies refers to an interdisciplinary field 'which draws on a range of subject areas including education, psychology, sociology, business studies and labour market economics' (Hooley, 2022, p. 660). Across these disciplines, several concepts within career studies describe how people are trained in order to learn how to manage the lifelong interaction between education, work and life in general and linked to

this, the ability to make choices. Likewise, several concepts denote the efforts teachers and supervisors put in place to support people in this. Multiple concepts such as 'career learning', 'career development', 'career management skills', 'career management', 'career competencies', 'career education' and 'career counselling' are used. These concepts overlap and are used differently by different users (Hughes et al., 2016; Irving, 2015, p. 299). For example, Hooley argues that there can be variations across countries in how the concepts are understood and applied (Hooley, 2013).

Variations in the use and understanding of the concepts in other contexts may reflect different theoretical and philosophical understandings as well as political and ideological starting points within and external to the field of career guidance (Sultana, 2013; Hooley, 2022). Watts, points out that the inconsistency in term usage extends into policy and emphasises that 'the language used to describe career development in relation to public policy is varied and often confusing' (Watts, 2011, p. 3). He argues that more consistent use of concepts is essential for communication within the field of career guidance and between the field and parties outside the field and that 'some branding based on core concepts is needed to support consistency, coherence and continuity' (ibid).

As argued by Sultana (2022), there is a relationship between language, thought and action, 'reminding us that our thoughts and actions are intimately mediated by the words we use: we inhabit 'discursive ecologies' where words are connected, creating webs of meaning and signification that orient us to seeing and acting upon the world - as well as feeling - in particular ways' (Sultana, 2022, p. 3). A key argument here is that linguistic or semantic confusion matters because words and concepts shape the world and how we see and engage in it.

This relationship is especially evident when a contested concept without a single 'correct' definition (Hooley, 2022) crosses borders to new systems, organisations and users. This study reveals that this was the case when career learning was implemented in Denmark as a new educational concept in the academic upper secondary education programme.

Integrating different forms of career education is not unique to the Danish context (Poulsen & Buland, 2020). Teachers facilitating reflections on career competencies and focusing on career development is becoming more common, and an increased interest in the partnership between teachers and counsellors can be seen in different contexts and countries (e.g., The Careers and Enterprise Company, 2022; Haug et al., 2019, 2020; Poulsen, 2020; Poulsen & Buland, 2020; Røise, 2020). However, previous research and evaluations have indicated that a 'translation' of career education from counsellors to teachers is not without challenges (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut & Rambøll, 2019; Felby, 2022).

## Introduction to central concepts in Koselleck's conceptual history

The study's theoretical and analytical point of departure is Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual history (in German: Begriffsgeschichte). The focal point in Koselleck's anti-essentialist and constructivist theory is the conceptual historical analysis that gives insight into concepts

which are 'constantly changing spaces or horizons of possible meanings.' (Koselleck, 2007, p. 19. Authors' translation). Koselleck developed his theory to analyse the transition to modern times. As it is a historical theory, he does not discuss whether contemporary concepts can be analysed using the same method. However, Koselleck's theory is used in contemporary educational research and political analysis. For example, Linné analyses curriculum theory and didactics (Linné, 2015), and Tveit (2009) analyses how parents describe their role, the teachers' role and their conversations.

In this study, we use aspects of Koselleck's theory as analytical tools to analyse and discuss how teachers at upper secondary education position themselves to the concept of career learning. Below, we present key aspects of Koselleck's theory.

In Koselleck's theory, the definition of concepts becomes a battlefield, where concepts can be ascribed different meanings and thereby 'occupied' by actors in different contexts continuously. This is intensified as the understanding of a concept is defining for the future: 'When concepts start to reach into the future, the battle to define the future also becomes a battle to define the concepts' (Koselleck, 2007, p. 13. Authors' translation).

According to Koselleck concepts unite a wealth of meanings, and thus it is in the concepts' nature that the final meaning cannot be defined and that they are changeable across time and context. This means that when people ascribe meaning to a concept, it can be seen as 'positioning' and as part of creating collective identities. Koselleck thus shows that concepts describe social and political conditions (Ifversen, 2007).

In his theory, Koselleck distinguishes between three asymmetric counter concepts, which according to him, form metahistorical conditions for the constitution of history:

- The first oppositional pair is called 'space of experience' and 'horizon of expectation' (sooner or later), where Koselleck describes that 'past and future never coincide' (Koselleck, 2004, p. 260). The present exists in the tension between the space of experience and expectations.
- The second oppositional pair is called 'inside' and 'outside' (Koselleck, 1990) or 'friend' and 'foe' (Koselleck, 2004, p. 191). This pair indicates the difference between those inside and outside the community. The inside of the community stands together on their common welfare, while those on the outside threaten the welfare of the community (Åkerstrøm, 1999).
- The third oppositional pair is called 'above' and 'below' and concerns power relations (Koselleck, 2004, p. 187). It points out that inside communities of different kinds, there are different hierarchies and positions. In that sense, this oppositional pair indicates the internal pecking order.

These three oppositional pairs function as analytical tools and form the framework for the discussion later in the study. As a theoretical framework, Koselleck's conceptual history can be used to illuminate how concepts in careers – here career learning – are ascribed meaning and occupied in a particular setting. In addition, the theoretical framework can

be used to illuminate how social and political factors affect the attribution of meaning, and that this attribution becomes important for what may and can happen in future practice.

## Context of the study and empirical design

The reported study focuses on the academic upper secondary education programme (STX) being Danish youth's most common upper secondary path (Gymnasieskolerne lærerforening, 2020). Teachers at STX are predominantly academically qualified through a master's degree. For instance, studying mathematics at university qualifies one to teach mathematics in STX. Once employed at STX, one can be offered a Postgraduate Diploma of Education (in Danish: 'pædagogikum').

Data in this paper draws on semi-structured interviews with ten teachers at three STX schools, with different catchment areas. One in the centre of a large city (urban), one in a big provincial town close to a larger city (county), and one in a smaller town situated in a rural area (rural). Through the case schools, an invitation letter was sent to the teachers asking them to participate in the research project. It was described that it was not expected or required that they knew precisely how they could, would, or should incorporate career learning in the subjects they teach. Each teacher was interviewed two times in a period of 18 months in 2018–2019.

Table 1 provides an overview of the teachers' teaching profiles.

**Table 1: Overview of teachers' teaching profiles**

Case School	Name	Subject Field
Urban	Henry	Mathematics, English
Urban	John	Social Studies, English
Urban	Sophie	Danish, Religious Studies
County	Andrew	History, Physical Education
County	Kate	Danish, Psychology
County	Bo	Mathematics, Chemistry
County	Michael	English, History
Rural	Vera	Mathematics, Danish
Rural	Peter	Danish, Art
Rural	Poul	Biology, Chemistry

The interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed by one of the authors, Felby. The research conducted in 2018-2019 at Aarhus University adhered to ethical research standards for studies involving minimal human interaction. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, all participants were anonymized in line with the Helsinki Declaration. Furthermore, all teachers at every stage of the research were informed about the research's purpose and the data's use, and they provided informed consent.

## Coding

A deductive approach to data analysis was adopted. Both authors independently read the transcriptions several times and wrote codes in the margin. Reading and coding were both guided by Koselleck's three counter concepts and informed by the study's research questions. The authors compared the differences and similarities of the codes and discussed to gain a common understanding of the codes within each of the three counter concepts.

## Analysis

### Experience and expectation

Experience and expectation can be observed in two ways in the data; one dealing with the teachers' experiences with the political system – and, thereby, their expectations of the same, and one dealing with the teachers' own experience with their career path – and thereby their expectations of the students.

### Teachers' experience and expectations of politicians

The most pervasive horizon of experience and expectations among the teachers is linked to their experiences and expectations with the political system and educational reforms, which create a fundamental scepticism towards the concept of career learning. Thus, across the empirical data, the teachers express that they distance themselves from the concept of the political motive or reasoning behind integrating career learning in STX to support early and more targeted career- and educational choices. For the teachers, this is based on their expectations of what the political ambition is to introduce career learning in STX, as supported by Poul (rural):

'I see it as a targeting towards making fewer wrong choices...I think, politically, career learning is a matter of resource management. We need to get the students through the educational system faster'.

(Poul, rural)

The teachers refer to previous reforms in academic upper secondary education Programmes (specifically at STX) and other parts of the educational system. As an example, one teacher concludes that the focus on career learning should be seen 'as an extension of the study progress reform' (John, urban). Similarly, Sophie's experience with the political system means that she expects the politicians to use career learning as a tool to create 'soldiers of the competition state' (Sophie, urban).

Furthermore, the teachers' experience with an everyday linguistic understanding of what a 'career' is influences their expectations for working with the concept. Thus, they tend to

see careers as 'educational choices', 'job choices', 'targeting' and 'hierarchical progression', which John points out:

'When you think about the word "career", it is hierarchical, like a ladder you have to climb, an individual project of prestige. It is not because the word "career" is necessarily defined in that way, but these are some of the connotations that belong to the word.'

(John, urban)

John elaborates that it is his experience that it can be experienced as 'transgressive to discuss careers with 1st year students' (approximately 16 years old). Thus, he links talks about careers with a focus on getting the students to make a fast educational choice and not for example widening their horizons on careers. He is sceptical towards an early targeting of the students and therefore he does not want to discuss careers with them during their first year.

These experiences and understanding of the concept of career generally challenge the teachers' experience with the meaningfulness of career learning in STX, especially when everyday linguistic understanding and expectations of the political system interact. In those cases, the teachers tend to rule out career learning as a meaningful concept for their (disciplinary and didactic) practice and students.

### **The teachers' career path**

All the teachers were asked about their career path towards their current job as teachers at STX. Most teachers say they have become STX teachers more or less by chance.

Overall, the teachers' experience of their career path as unplanned and random plays into their expectations of the potential of career learning as a teaching concept. Their fundamental scepticism towards the concept of career, as they assume the Ministry understands it, combined with their own experience of 'making a career', has the consequence that they do not find it relevant (or realistic) that students already at STX should be 'pressured' into career planning.

In addition, there are teachers who – based on their own experiences – would like to convey to the students that there is value in taking more time over decisions concerning learning choices and completing their education. This can be seen in John's reflection below:

'I later regretted that I did not slow down during my studies because I had a fun time studying. I sometimes talk with the students about it. Then we will have a few talks about it, and I will offer some advice about student life from "an old man's perspective" – how it is also valuable and not just a means to get a career afterwards.'

(John, urban)

Similarly, some teachers highlight the conflict between their understanding of the political concept of career learning, the value of taking sabbaticals and enjoying your time studying and the gaps that may come. As an example, this can be seen with Kate, who states:



'I usually tell them to take a sabbatical. But I say that it is off the record [laughs] I think that, as their teacher, my task is to see their needs, and not just push them through [the educational system]. And to reassure them, that it is okay to take a gap year.'

(Kate, county)

Among the teachers time off from education are seen as valuable parts of one's career path and as something they want to convey to the students. The consequence is two-sided; some teachers, like John, talk directly to the students about it. In this way, he practices career learning, although without being aware of it. For other teachers such as Kate, the outcome is that she refuses to work with the 'political' concept of career learning as it does not harmonise with her understanding of the value of time and breaks. Thus, the teachers have two tracks in their actualisation of career learning, formulated in the tension between the space of experience and the horizon of expectations. In one track, career learning is formulated in connection with their experiences with, and expectations of, the political system and the everyday understanding of a career. In the other track, career learning is formulated in connection with their own experiences of embarking on and planning a career.

These interpretations draw on the teachers' space of experience and horizon of expectations. Although the interpretations occur in the present, they draw on what has already happened, said and done, thus influencing possibilities in the future. Therefore, the semantic battles to occupy and generalise the concept are expected to continue.

## Inside and outside

Koselleck presents the opposition pair inside or outside – or more pointedly formulated as the distinction between friend and foe (Koselleck, 2004).

### Inside

In the data, the teachers see themselves and their teaching colleagues as those who stand together on the 'inside' – of the educational system, the curriculum and the students. This is by ensuring that the students learn 'how it is to live as a human being' (Sophie, urban) through their work with the students' professional and vocational development, well-being, and agency development in their own lives. This can be seen in the following quote:

'We have to prepare the students to live their best life possible in which they do not let themselves be controlled by others, but instead are able to say "no" and ask themselves "what is important in my life today as a young person?" As teachers, we can illuminate and equip them for the good and bad in life.'

(Sophie, urban)

Similarly, Andrew argues that the most important learning at STX is learning how to 'reflect on the world, on the life you live, to see that life can be lived in many ways and can be done in many ways around the world. You do not necessarily need huge means to have a good life.' (Andrew, county)



In conjunction with their horizon of experience and expectations, the teachers thus position themselves through a strong identity as STX teachers and through an understanding of what an STX education is, and what it can and should be used for. The teachers are thus in opposition to the outside, which for the teachers in this study is the Ministry of Children and Education.

## Outside

When the teachers position themselves as 'insiders', it becomes clear that they perceive those standing outside are the Ministry of Children and Education. As mentioned earlier, there is an expectation that the Ministry wants to push the students towards early targeting and choice-making in relation to their future career paths and choice of further education.

At the same time, the teachers perceive the Ministry as an enemy that seeks to pressure not only their students, but also themselves as teachers in terms of finances, time and the opportunity to teach their subjects competently, among other things. One teacher, Michael (county), uses company visits and internships, (career learning activities required/recommended by the Ministry), as an example of this external pressure on the teachers and their profession. Michael argues that company visits and internship collaborations can be meaningful, but they take large amounts of time away from other parts of the subject-specific curriculum which is a huge concern. Additionally, the student's subject and theoretical learning during the company visits or internships is not equal to the time 'away' from the subject-specific curriculum in class. Michael's argument emphasises that, although in theory, a teacher like Michael would like to take this kind of initiative, in practice it is difficult as it requires resources that are not available.

The Ministry's wish to introduce career learning as an educational concept also has the consequence of being positioned as an enemy of the teaching profession and professionalism. This is evident, for example, in the following excerpt from the interview with Poul:

'The fact that the Ministry tries to target young people means that we lose the curious, investigative, playful approach to the subject, which is disastrous for natural science...The breadth and depth, and the critical approach, the investigative approach, for which Danish students are praised all over the world, we risk losing it.'

(Poul, Rural)

In the quote, Poul expects that through career learning, the Ministry has a utility perspective on subjects, disciplines, and education in general, i.e. is it useful? Based on that expectation, he points out that career learning – understood as what subjects can be used for in terms of education and career – potentially removes or destroys the interest in his subject. With reference to Koselleck, Åkerstrøm Andersen points out that 'Inside we stand together and protect our welfare. Outside someone or something threatens our welfare.' (Åkerstrøm Andersen, 1999, p. 82. Authors' translation). Poul argues that the outside (the Ministry) is threatening the welfare of his students (and his discipline).

The boundary between inside and outside is not stable in the data material. It is negotiated continuously, both under the impression of what the expectations are for the Ministry's

understanding of career learning and the impression of the everyday understanding of the concept of career held by the teachers.

## Above and below

Koselleck describes the opposition pair 'above and below', which generally characterises the possible positioning within a community (Koselleck, 2004). It appears from the empirical material that the positions are fluid; there is a hierarchy between subjects, and there is a hierarchy between regions.

### The hierarchy between different subjects

The data indicates that most teachers are under the assumption that while career learning can be integrated as a natural part of some subjects, career learning in other subjects is not considered meaningful or even possible. In this connection, most teachers view subjects other than their own as more suitable for integrating career learning as an educational concept. As an example, a math teacher, says:

'In a subject like Danish, you as a teacher can say that the students could become journalists. So, as a teacher in Danish, you definitely go in and practise some "journalistic teaching". You teach the students to write. Because almost regardless of what they get into jobwise, they have to write. After all, not everyone ends up being a mathematician.'

(Vera, rural)

Overall, however, in several of the teachers' descriptions, career learning is something other than the subject itself – an add-on that can be difficult to integrate meaningfully into a busy day and a full curriculum.

### The hierarchy between regions

Finally, the data indicate that the opposition pair 'up and down' is demonstrated through differences concerning the geographical and regional location of the schools in the study. The difference between the two larger cities (urban and county) and the smaller city (rural) is particularly noticeable. The teachers at the urban and county schools argue that the location of their schools in large cities provides better opportunities to visit companies and cultural institutions. They argue that it is easier for them to apply their subjects to the world outside of education and meet specific practices; i.e. a more classic external world orientation concerning career learning. Contrary to the teachers from the urban and county case schools, teachers at the Rural case school, emphasise that they find arranging company visits particular challenge due to having to travel longer distances and there being fewer companies with employees who have completed tertiary education.

Poul, who teaches biology and chemistry at the rural case school, mentions that in their regional area, there is only a smaller selection of companies which makes teachers very dependent on the parents of the students. The analysis thus shows that it is implicit in the teachers' assessment that the upper secondary schools in or close to the larger cities are 'up' in terms of the integration of career learning, while the upper secondary schools in the

peripheral or rural area are 'down'. This has to be understood in the sense that they have greater challenges in making use of the outside world in the career learning work.

## Discussion

The teachers' efforts to attribute meaning to the concept of career learning is challenged by the fact that the concept needs to be clearly defined in government policy documents for academic upper secondary education programmes. In that sense, the concept of 'career learning' becomes an empty signifier which is in motion and continuously must be filled with new meaning. Koselleck emphasises that when an ambiguous concept (in this case, career learning) is uncertain, it can be directed to anything, and no content can be excluded. On the other hand, the concept can be given a specific quality with which boundaries are drawn but does not originate directly from the concept (Koselleck, 2004).

The teachers emphasise and criticise that the concept of career learning is so broad that, in practice, it can include anything, which makes it meaningless. Thus, the teachers describe career learning as what Irving refers to as a 'catch-all' term (Irving, 2015, p. 299). On the other hand, the teachers try to attribute a special quality to the concept; namely to support the students to develop agency and expand their horizons. In this way, the teachers draw boundaries for career learning based on a desire to occupy the concept with meaning they experience as appropriate for them, the subject they teach and their students.

The teachers assume that the meaning attributed to career learning by the Ministry of Children and Education is primarily related to targeting students' educational choices. In response to the boundary they draw concerning the concept, the teachers assess the meaning they attribute to career learning to differ from that of the Ministry of Children and Education. Furthermore, when prioritising that students develop agency in life and widen their horizons, the teachers do not meet the expectations expressed in the executive order.

The conflict experienced by the teachers between the meaning they ascribe to career learning and the meaning they expect the Ministry of Children and Education to ascribe to career learning is reinforced by the fact that the education system (of which the STX is a part) and the labour market are complex and highly politicised fields. The many possible meanings and tensions in negotiating the career learning concept illustrate that the concept is part of this complex and politicised field. In particular it is rooted in values, discourses and philosophical understandings of what education is for. What is the purpose of education? Who should we educate? For what should the students train? How do we maintain a welfare society? These questions to which the concept of career learning is linked are neither answered nor resolved by 'getting a handle on the concept'. Tensions in the field will remain. Interpretations of the concept career learning draw on the experiences and expectations of teachers, politicians, students and citizens. These interpretations occur in the present but draw on what has already happened (what has been said and done), thus influencing future possibilities. Hence, the semantic battles to occupy the concept of career learning are expected to continue.

## Conclusion

The contribution of this study is twofold. Firstly, it contributes to the literature by providing insights into the translation and negotiation of career learning in a new context – namely STX. In addition, it illuminates how teachers’ understanding of the concept of career learning is linked to their desire to maintain a meaningful teaching practice – for the sake of themselves, their subject and their students. Secondly, the study contributes to the literature by using – in an educational and career guidance theoretical perspective – a novel theoretical framework to illuminate the conceptualisation and occupation of new concepts within an educational setting.

In the study, we draw on observations and interviews with ten teachers from academic upper secondary education (STX). However, there are weaknesses to this data. One is that the study is based on empirical evidence from a limited period and collected shortly after introducing the concept of career learning in the Danish academic upper secondary educational programme. Another weakness is that the study explores the meaning and use of a concept at a specific (and short) time in contrast to Koselleck, who investigated longer complex historical time courses. However, although the empirical evidence was produced over a relatively short period of time, the selected parts of the conceptual framework expressly analyse and discuss the battles and negotiations around the semantic occupation with a complex concept, such as career learning.

Overall, the study provides insight into STX teachers’ attribution of meaning concerning career learning as a newly introduced concept into their teaching practice. Furthermore, the study provides insight into the challenges that can and often will arise when concepts are not clearly defined and are formulated outside the specific context in which they are to be applied. In this case, when educational concepts are formulated at a political level and in government policy documents. This study shows, the STX teachers’ translation of policy into practice creates an interpretive vacuum that makes it challenging to operationalise career learning in teaching practice. As Koselleck identifies, it is important to adhere to the fact that because a concept is characterised by its ambiguity – it will always demand an integration in to practice through the negotiation of meaning. As the study has shown, this negotiation of meaning is complex and full of internal and external paradoxes.

Despite this ongoing tension around the negotiation of the concept of career learning, the study also draws attention to the fact that there is goodwill and desire to operationalise the concept by the teachers – but only in a meaningful manner. Equally, clarification of meaning of the concept ‘career learning’ within government policy can impact on how the concept is applied by teachers and its future development.



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