Nordic research on educational and vocational guidance: a systematic literature review of thematic features between 2003 and 2016

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Abstract
Educational and vocational guidance has received increased attention with regard to policymaking in the Nordic countries over the last 15 years. This has led to a growing interest in research-based knowledge. Updating an earlier article, we undertake a systematic literature review of guidance research in the Nordic countries during this 15-year period. Features and themes, both country-specific and in the region as a whole, are revealed through the analysis of a variety of research documents. Therefore, this article provides insight into research-based knowledge grounded in the Nordic context—relevant for both practitioners and policymakers on a national, Nordic, and international level.

Résumé.
Recherche nordique sur l’orientation scolaire et professionnelle - une revue systématique de la littérature sur les caractéristiques thématiques entre 2003 et 2016 L’orientation scolaire et professionnelle a fait l’objet d’une attention politique accrue dans les pays nordiques au cours des 15 dernières années. Cela a conduit à un intérêt croissant pour les connaissances fondées sur la recherche. En mettant à jour un article précédent, nous procédons à une revue systématique de la recherche sur l’orientation dans les pays nordiques ces 15 dernières années. Les caractéristiques et les thèmes, propres à chaque pays et à l’ensemble de la région, sont révélés par l’analyse de divers documents de recherche. Par conséquent, cet article fournit des informations sur les connaissances découlant des recherches effectuées en contexte nordique, pertinentes à la fois pour les praticiens et les décideurs au niveau national, nordique et international.

Zusammenfassung.
Nordische Forschung zur Bildungs- und Berufsberatung – Ein systematischer Literaturüberblick über thematische Schwerpunkte zwischen 2003 und 2016 Die Bildungs- und Berufsberatung hat in den letzten 15 Jahren in den nordischen Ländern zunehmend an Bedeutung gewonnen. Dies hat zu einem wachsenden Interesse an forschungsbasiertem Wissen geführt. Wir aktualisieren einen früheren Artikel indem wir eine systematische Literaturrecherche über die
Beratungsforschung in den nordischen Ländern während dieses Zeitraums durchführen. Besonderheiten und thematische Schwerpunkte, sowohl länderspezifisch als auch bezogen auf die gesamte Region, werden durch die Analyse einer Vielzahl an Forschungsergebnissen aufgezeigt. Der Artikel liefert einen Einblick in das forschungsbasierte Wissen im nordischen Kontext und ist sowohl für Praktiker als auch für politische Entscheidungsträger auf nationaler, nordischer und internationaler Ebene relevant.

Resumen.
La investigación sobre la orientación educativa y vocacional en los Países Nórdicos: una revisión sistemática de la literatura de características temáticas entre 2003 y 2016
La orientación educativa y vocacional ha recibido una creciente atención política en los Países Nórdicos en los últimos 15 años. Esto ha conducido a un creciente interés por la investigación basada en el conocimiento. Actualizando un primer artículo, se emprende una revisión sistemática de la investigación en orientación en los Países Nórdicos durante este periodo de 15 años. Características y temas, ambos, en cada país específico y en la región como un todo, son mostrados a través del análisis de una variedad de documentos de investigación. Además, este artículo nos permite formarnos una idea de la investigación basada en el conocimiento asentada en el contexto de los Países Nórdicos, pertinente tanto para prácticos como teóricos a nivel nacional, Nórdico e internacional.

Keywords Educational and vocational guidance · Systematic literature review · Nordic comparison

Introduction

Educational and vocational guidance is sometimes characterized as a ‘globally travelling idea’. It exists in some form in most developed countries and many developing countries. However, little attention has been given to how context shapes the concept of educational and vocational guidance as it travels across the globe (McMahon, Watson, & Patton, 2014). In this article, we explore the patterns of prominent themes in research on educational and vocational guidance in the Nordic countries from 2003 to 2016. Our aim is to provide insight into research-based knowledge grounded in the Nordic context—relevant for both practitioners and policymakers on a national, Nordic, and international level.

The Nordic region (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, as well as the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland) displays strong cultural, political, and geographical similarities that make it appropriate for analysis as a unified area (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2017). Yet despite these cultural and political similarities, the Nordic countries are less homogeneous than outsiders often assume. Superficial similarities mask substantial differences, which manifest in various aspects of culture, education, and employment, as well as different routes in the political and practical development of guidance. In this context, Plant, Christiansen, Lovén,
Vilhjálmsdóttir, and Vuorinen (2003) conducted a review on current trends in educational and vocational guidance research in the Nordic region. In the 2003 review, the authors concluded that the amount of existing research was relatively small, and that the Nordic countries had followed slightly different—if complementary—paths in terms of research on educational and vocational guidance (Plant et al., 2003). One of the key reasons for conducting a new review 15 years later was the many new developments that have affected the Nordic guidance field over this period.

Since 2003, Denmark has experienced a profound reorganization of career guidance through a professionalization strategy and the formation of independent youth career guidance centres. However, the centres are now facing severe cutbacks, and as a result are joining forces with other youth guidance initiatives to create one-stop shops, focusing the service on the 20% of young people most in need of guidance. Norway, on the other hand, has seen an increase in policy interest and funding. The country has established regional career centres for adults and has created a compulsory career learning programme in secondary school, all of which is supported by the development of a new masters in career guidance and growth in research and evaluation. A governmental green paper from 2016 pointed to the need for holistic, all-age guidance and a national quality framework that is now taking shape. Iceland, in the midst of its severe economic crises, has instituted a universal right to career guidance and has introduced innovative approaches to regionalized workplace guidance.

Sweden has witnessed several important developments, including the development of new career guidance approaches for immigrants coming to Sweden. In Finland, they have created a national strategy for lifelong guidance to develop cross-sectoral provision at the national, regional, and local levels. The Finnish strategy encompasses equal access to services, career management skills, guidance practitioner competencies, quality assurance, and cross-sectoral cooperation and coordination. Currently, the country faces major reform in the organization of the public employment sector in 2020. If the proposed legislation is passed, public employment services will merge into new regionally organized growth services, delivered by private companies. This reform will include major challenges, including comprehensive coordination and management of the services.

Overall, this depicts a volatile situation, and an intensified policy interest, aligned with a growing number of scholarly studies. The Nordic scholars involved, though few in number, have been highly active in research, and thus in providing robust inputs to the policymaking processes and development of research-based practice, both on a national and an international level.

Method

A team of national experts on educational and vocational guidance research from the five Nordic countries assembled to collaborate in the review process. In accordance with recommendations for conducting systematic literature reviews (Creswell, 2013) exemplified by Hughes, Mann, Barnes, Baldauf, and McKeown (2016), the study adhered to the following:
• Setting review parameters—refining the review question, defining keywords, and developing the search strategy
• Searching—the systematic identification of potentially relevant research using a keyword strategy
• Screening—the application of predetermined criteria to report titles, abstracts, and full texts derived from the review question and related sub-questions
• Synthesis and reporting—the analysis and identification of key findings.

The study thus follows the principles of a systematic literature review method.

Setting review parameters

Our aim was to explore thematic features in research on educational and vocational guidance within the five Nordic countries from 2003 to 2016. Our intention was thus to explore key features in educational and vocational guidance research within a given period and context.

The research included both empirical and theoretical contributions from peer-reviewed articles/book chapters, PhD theses, anthologies, and evaluative reports (grey literature). As was evident from several articles (e.g. Lovén, 2003; McMahon, 2014), the terms educational, vocational, and career guidance are used somewhat interchangeably to describe the same phenomenon. The same variety of concepts is evident in the different Nordic languages. Although we use educational and vocational guidance as an overall concept in this article, we included the following keywords in the search phase of the review: educational (or/and) vocational (or/and) guidance in the respective languages of the countries (Iceland: náms- og starfsráðgjöf; Norway: yrkesveiledning, utdannings- og yrkesrådgivning, yrkes- og utdanningsrådgivning, karriereveiledning og karriererådgivning; Sweden: studie- och yrkesvägledning; Finland: uraohjaus, urasuunnittelun ohjaus, opintovahjaus, oppilaanohjaus; Denmark: vejledning). Further, we included research from a Nordic context written in English. Here, we used the keywords educational (or/and) vocational (or/and) career (or/and) guidance. In our view, the different areas covered in the research literature coincide with the definition of educational and vocational guidance developed in the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) Glossary (2014). There, educational guidance is defined as ‘helping an individual to reflect on personal educational issues and experiences and to make appropriate educational choices’, while vocational guidance is defined as ‘help for individuals to make choices about education, training and employment’ (ELGPN, 2014).

Search and screening

The guidelines developed in the first phase framed the search and screening phase of the review process. Each of the national experts searched national databases (SWEPUB, DIVA, ORIA, SKEMMAN, FINNA). Further, as a quality assurance measure, we compared and supplemented the findings with existing relevant national research reviews (e.g. Buland & Mathiesen, 2008; National Audit Office,
In this process, we agreed to include research that contained explicit paragraphs with implications for educational and vocational guidance—although not focusing primarily on guidance. Country representatives gathered their findings in a country note. Table 1 displays the distribution of findings in the initial screening process.

### Synthesis

The content of the national reports was analysed based on recommendations in systematic exploratory review methodology (Creswell, 2013). This involved systematization of the documented research based on thematic areas, stated intentions in the studies, and specific target groups. We further compared and synthesized preliminary conclusions from all country notes into themes of current features. Given the number of research reports, the following presentation of thematic features will emphasize representations of prominent research areas rather than act as an exhaustive list of all documented research revealed through the review process.

### Features in Nordic research on educational and vocational guidance between 2003 and 2016

Regarding the distribution among the countries, the total number of documented research texts varies from 36 (Norway) to 76 (Denmark). Sweden and Finland have a larger number of PhD theses (18/51) than the other countries (4/3/2), while Iceland stands out as the most prominent provider of peer-reviewed articles (37). With regard to evaluative reports, Denmark has over three times the number of reported projects in this category as the next most prolific country (Norway).

The analysis of the research reports revealed three thematic areas. The first is a focus on the outcome of educational and vocational guidance, with the subcategories comprising outcome of educational and vocational guidance in a school context, focus on outcome of educational and vocational guidance for adults, and outcome of educational and vocational guidance related to different target groups. A second theme involves the guidance process, with the subcategories educational and vocational guidance related to different target groups.
vocational guidance in groups and communities, information and communication technology (ICT)-oriented/multi-channel approaches, contextualization of international inventories, and professionalization of the guidance practitioners. The third thematic area consists of critical approaches. Table 2 shows the distribution among the different themes included in this review.

**Theme 1: Focus on the outcome of educational and vocational guidance**

The main area of research we find in this review is concerned with the potential outcome of educational and vocational guidance. This correlates with the findings reported in the prior review (Plant et al., 2003). We begin with examples in a school context, which contains the largest volume of research in this category.

**Outcome of educational and vocational guidance in a school context**

A common feature in all Nordic research related to the outcomes of guidance in a school context is an emphasis on young peoples’ transitional phases, and how guidance could or should be delivered to contribute in these processes (e.g. Buland, Mathiesen, & Mordal, 2014; Day, Kaiser, & Nielsen, 2009; Hultgren, 2009; Katznelson & Pless, 2005; Lund, 2006; Pless & Katznelson, 2007). More specifically, the focus has been on the measurement of outcomes in career learning programmes (e.g. Lødding & Holen, 2012) and school-based guidance provision (e.g. Buland & Havn, 2003; Buland & Mathiesen, 2008; Buland, Mathiesen, Aaslid, Haugsbakken, & Bungum, 2010; Buland et al., 2011). A common feature of these studies is the presentation of an overall picture of the development and quality of guidance in Nordic schools. Studies are mainly financed through national or regional governments, and aimed at evaluating national or regional projects that have already been initiated (e.g. Atjonen, Manninen, Mäkinen, & Vanhalakka-
Ruoho, 2011; Christensen & Larsen, 2011; Danish Evaluation Institute, 2007; Epinion, Pluss Leadership, & the Danish Centre for Youth Research, 2012; Rambøll, 2005a, b, 2006a, b, 2007). The methodological design is often triangulation, with a combination of observation, surveys, and interviews.

Recent research in a Danish school context also includes an emphasis of the usefulness of introducing career management skills concepts (e.g. Juul, Pless, & Katznelson, 2016; Katznelson, Lundby, & Møller Hansen, 2016; Poulsen, Thomsen, Buhl, & Hagmayer, 2016). In Iceland, Vilhjálmsdóttir (2007) compared two approaches in career education—experiential and cognitive—in an evaluative study. In Finland, Tapio (2010) focused on the effects of a group counselling and classroom guidance model with the aim of helping students improve their achievement strategies.

Focus on outcome of educational and vocational guidance for adults

The research in this category focuses mainly on (1) evaluating different methodological approaches in guidance (e.g. Vanhalakka-Ruoho & Ruponen, 2013), (2) guidance services as regards career-related issues occurring with organizational changes (e.g. Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2015; Hallqvist, 2012), and (3) organizational developments in the provision of services (e.g. Vilhjálmsdóttir, Kjartansdóttir, & Dofradóttir, 2011). In particular, the research in the last area covered evaluations of the establishment of regional partnerships for career guidance (e.g. Becken, Klingenberg, Berg, & Jordell, 2014; Bergem, Grimsrud, & Halvorsen, 2015; Borgen, Røste, & Vibe, 2008; Buland & Haugsbakken, 2009; Feiring & Helgesen, 2007, Mathisen & Stokke, 2011; Nyhus, Solbu, & Stokke, 2011; Stokke & Nyhus, 2010).

In addition to the three main thematic areas mentioned earlier, research has been undertaken to study career development and its implications for practice in a university context (Lairio, Puukari, & Kouvo, 2011; Svennungsen, 2011). Another segment relates to the outcome of guidance in different rehabilitation and public employment settings (Pasanen, 2007; Reme et al., 2016; Sveinsdottir et al., 2014). The research methodology in this thematic category varies from qualitative studies—typically with the intention of investigating the experience of users (e.g. Svennungsen, 2011)—to quantitative approaches, such as multi-centre randomized controlled trials (Reme et al., 2016).

Outcome of educational and vocational guidance related to different target groups

In all Nordic countries, there is particular interest in research on target-specific approaches for educational and vocational guidance (e.g. Hertzberg, 2003; Larsen, Day, Boysen, & Hansen, 2008; Lindblad, 2016; Lundqvist, 2010; Sheikh, 2013; Sundelin, 2015). Although it is present in all countries (e.g. Juutilainen, 2003; Mathiesen, Buland, & Bungum, 2010; Sørensen, Sørensen, Plant, & Wolthers, 2007; Sørensen, Madsen, & Sørensen, 2006; Zuleta & Krohn, 2013), Sweden stands out with a special focus on migrants (e.g. Lindblad, 2016; Lundqvist, 2010; Sheikh, 2013).
Another targeted group of interest is dropouts from upper secondary education (e.g. Blöndal, Jónasson, & Tannhäuser, 2011). Longitudinal research on dropout tendency in relation to parenting (Blöndal & Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2009, 2014), student engagement, and expected educational pathways based on level of student engagement (Blöndal & Aðalbjarnardóttir, 2012) have been aimed at providing insights for policymakers and guidance practitioners who work as supportive agents for adolescents. Finally, we find an interest in career development among students with special needs (e.g. Honkanen, 2006).

Theme 2: The guidance process

We refer to the second theme as the guidance process. In the following, we will highlight research aimed at investigating educational and vocational guidance in groups and communities, ICT-oriented/multi-channel approaches, contextualization of international inventories, and professionalization of the guidance practitioners.

Educational and vocational guidance in groups and communities

Evident in the other Nordic countries (e.g. Tapio, 2010; Vanhalakka-Ruoho & Ruponen, 2013), but specifically emphasized in Denmark, we see an interest in research on collective forms of guidance (e.g. Thomsen, 2009; Valgreen, 2013). This change has been characterized as a collective shift in the view of how guidance ought to be delivered (Plant & Thomsen, 2012). As an example, Valgreen (2013) tested and further developed a method called Collective Narrative Practice via case studies in three Danish folk high schools\(^1\) (folkehøjskole). Thomsen (e.g. 2009, 2011, 2012) put a specific emphasis on studying the effect of moving guidance out of offices and into workplaces and actual working groups. In Finland, Koivuluhta and Puhakka (2013) performed a case study on a dialogic approach applied in group counselling. Vuori and Silvonen (2005) examined whether a preventive group-based job search programme had long-term beneficial effects on the re-employment and mental health of participants who had been unemployed for a prolonged period of time. Kettunen, Sampson, and Vuorinen (2015) focused on guidance that has expanded into online communities.

ICT-oriented/multi-channel approaches

The use of technology in career development systems and services has increased dramatically in recent years. In the Nordic countries, various studies have explored the concept of ICT as an integral part of educational and vocational guidance, as well as the attitudes among practitioners regarding this potential change in the structure of guidance provision. In the current review, it is evident that Finland, and

\(^1\) Folkehøjskoler are living examples of the enlightenment movement: they provide open adult education in residential settings.
especially a research team at the University of Jyväskylä, has taken the lead in focusing on these matters.

Bimrose, Kettunen, and Goddard (2015) use an international lens to examine some key elements that contribute to the successful integration of ICT into career practice, while Vuorinen and Kettunen (2012) and Vuorinen, Sampson, and Kettunen (2011) present issues for critical implementation of ICT in the training programmes for career professionals. Vuorinen (2006) examined the perceptions of career practitioners regarding their use of the internet in guidance, and Kettunen, Vuorinen, and Sampson (2015) examined career practitioners’ conceptions of competency in social media in career services. The results of this study were successfully applied to the development of curriculum for the international summer course for ICT in guidance and counselling in Finland. In a recent study, Kettunen, Vuorinen, and Ruusuvirta (2016) examined the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN) representatives’ conceptions of the role of information and communication technologies related to national guidance policies.

Contextualization of international inventories

In Iceland, there seems to be a persistent focus on research seeking to test the applicability of internationally developed inventories for the measurement of vocational interest and career adaptability. Although evident in some research in the other countries (e.g. Dybwad, 2008), this seems to be an Icelandic phenomenon among the Nordic countries. In 2009, Icelandic researchers joined an international team in producing a psychometric scale to measure career adaptability. Vilhjálmsdóttir, Kjartansdóttir, Smáradóttir, and Einarsdóttir (2012) examined the psychometric characteristics and construct validity of the Icelandic version (CAAS-Iceland). Other findings have suggested that a gender-type dimension may influence the responses of men and women to the items in the Strong Interest Inventory (Einarsdóttir, 2005; Einarsdóttir & Rounds, 2009). Further, an emic approach was used to develop a set of Icelandic indigenous basic interest scales (Einarsdóttir, Eyjólfsdóttir, & Rounds, 2013). In 2010 (Einarsdóttir, Rounds, & Su, 2010), the use of Holland’s RIASEC model in Iceland was revisited. Testing for applicability, an Icelandic translation of the Career Thoughts Inventory (CTI) was administered to university students and career counselling clients (Björnsdóttir, Einarsdóttir, & Kárdal, 2008; Björnsdóttir, Kárdal, & Einarsdóttir, 2010).

Professionalization of the guidance practitioners

In the guidance process category, we also find research on different areas concerned with the professionalization of guidance practitioners. A study by Koskela (2013) aimed at developing counselling and guidance skills and interdisciplinary teamwork inside an organization. With the emerging expanded view of the guidance process as a backdrop, Onnismaa (2003) examined changes in guidance and counselling professionalism. Nielsen, Skovhus, and Buhl (2011) investigated the personal and organizational effect of participating in guidance diploma education in Denmark, while Nummenmaa, Sinisalo, and Vanhalakka-Ruoho (2008) examined two decades
of master’s degree programmes in guidance and counselling in Finland. In addition, Kupiainen (2009) focused on changes in guidance thinking among career counsellors by analysing their experiences and their account of their work, and Nykänen, Saukkonen, and Vuorinen (2012) examined the transformation in the provision of guidance.

**Theme 3: Critical approaches**

In the third theme, we include studies that investigate, problematize, and question the direction of the ongoing development of educational and vocational guidance in the Nordic countries.

**Governance of guidance**

Bengtsson (2011, 2015a, b, 2016) has contributed insight on this complex and dynamic interrelationship concerning the governance of guidance. The overall aim of these studies is to enquire into and problematize the governance of career guidance, and how individuals’ career management is constructed within EU policy. The Foucauldian governmentality perspective and the analytical method of problematization is used.

Another example is Kjærgård (2012), who in his work aims to show how career guidance is expressed as a regulating mechanism between the needs of society and the freedom of the individual to choose education and employment in a Norwegian context. Like Bengtsson, he draws inspiration from Foucault’s discourse analytics and power analytics.

**Social representations of career and career guidance**

Bergmo-Prvulovic (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015) focuses on a conceptual and critical approach in her study of social representations of career and career guidance in the changing world of working life. Her focus is on exploring the meaning of career as a phenomenon and its implications for career guidance.

**Discussion**

Our analysis revealed three main research themes, the most prominent of which involved the potential outcome of educational and vocational guidance in different sectors and for different user groups. We interpret this as a reflection of an increased focus at a European level on building a solid evidence base regarding the outcomes of educational and vocational guidance during the period this review has investigated (Haug & Plant, 2016). In our opinion, the review shows that the research undertaken is mainly in the form of evaluative studies aimed at describing and analysing either (a) the effect of new legislation or (b) the applicability of different organizational, procedural, and methodological approaches. In their article on researchers’ potential contribution to evidence-based practice and policymaking
in educational and vocational guidance, Haug and Plant (2016) argue for a broad and multipronged research strategy to meet the potential complexity of questions that may arise and evidence needed to provide answers. In our opinion, the review of Nordic research on educational and vocational guidance provides insight into different levels and dimensions of educational and vocational guidance in a Nordic context. Seen through a systemic lens (Patton & McMahon, 2014), the research findings span a range of views on guidance, from an intra-personal (e.g. Björnsdóttir, Einarsdóttir, & Kárdal, 2008) to a global perspective (Saukkonen & Parkkinen, 2011). Further, it encompasses both intra-organizational issues, such as management (Jensen, 2012), and topics related to inter-organizational issues such as different cooperative efforts (e.g. Thomsen & Jensen, 2011; Lunden, Hansen, Johansen, & Frederiksen, 2011). Third, the research is undertaken in both rural and urban areas of the Nordic countries (e.g. Lidström, 2009). Methodologically, we find examples of a multitude of approaches, from randomized controlled trials (Sveinsdottir et al., 2014) to biographical narratives (Lidström, 2009). Further, we find an emerging interest in a phenomenographic approach (e.g. Kettunen, Vuorinen, & Ruusuvirta, 2016), which is quite new in guidance research.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to provide insight into research-based knowledge grounded in the Nordic context for a given time period. The review reveals a rich source of research undertaken in many different areas and on a variety of topics within the community of educational and vocational guidance researchers in the Nordic countries.

Although we are optimistic regarding the potential utilization of the research revealed in this review, we must caution that a disproportionate emphasis on government-funded research can affect the design and results of such research. In this scenario, it is possible for research to assume a role of confirmative support of the appropriateness of proposed legislation rather than taking a more active role in driving the development of new policies and practices. Hooley (2014) points to the need for continuously addressing both whether we are doing things right, and whether we are doing the right things.

In this concluding section, we also want to highlight some potential limitations of this review. In our opinion, the greatest limitation is the difficulty inherent in comparing research conducted in different contexts and documented in different languages. In the introduction, we argued that there are both similarities and differences among the Nordic countries with regard to cultural, political, and geographical features. We are aware that the terms used to describe what we in this article call educational and vocational guidance differ among the countries. Whether we have understood the nuances and underlying meaning in the research reviewed is therefore a potential limitation, which brings us to a final recommendation for further research. During the process of this review, there have been interesting discussions among the members of the research group on the meanings of different terms used to conceptualize educational and vocational guidance. We have also found that there is very little cross-Nordic comparative research undertaken.
this situation, we recommend that initiatives be implemented to encourage more cross-Nordic research. The review has revealed several similar research interests across the different countries, and we think a comparative dimension could strengthen the impact of the research in the future.

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