

Skills for Work Life: A Case Exploration of a Practical Subject in Norwegian Lower Secondary Education

Keywords: work skills, lower secondary education, self-efficacy beliefs

Introduction:

In 2015, a new elective subject was introduced in Norwegian lower secondary schools. The idea behind *Skills for Work Life* was to offer a less theoretical alternative for students who did not wish to include a second foreign language in their portfolio. The topic of an increasingly theory-heavy school system has been widely debated in Norway in recent years. Lower secondary school subjects are designed to cover a broad set of competencies deemed necessary for further educational progression. For many students, this breadth is appropriate. However, for a considerable group, it appears to become an overwhelming theoretical burden. The purpose of *Skills for Work Life* is to provide practical tasks inspired by vocational education programs, adapted to the lower secondary level. The aim is to help students develop basic competence in service and product development, while emphasising good work habits and cooperative skills. The way the subject is carried out varies significantly across the country, and some schools do not offer *Skills for Work Life* at all.

Objectives:

Together with colleagues, I have gained access to conduct research at a lower secondary school in our region. The school is located in a sparsely populated area, characterised by agriculture and limited tradition for academic education. Over a period of 15 years, this school has managed to significantly improve student learning outcomes. Once known as a small village school marked by behavioural issues, absenteeism, and low performance on national tests, the school can now demonstrate results above the national average. According to the staff, the implementation and development of *Skills for Work Life* has been one of the main reasons for this positive transformation.

The study is drawing on different theoretical perspectives on school development and improvement (e.g. Biesta, 2009 & Irgens, 2018) on one side, and self-efficacy beliefs in career trajectories (Bandura et al., 2003) on the other. I will present the analysis of how this particular school has worked with implementing *Skills for Work Life*, and discuss the still untapped potential such a practical subject may offer students with low motivation for a theoretical school experience.

Methodology

The research is based on qualitative interviews and questionnaires. All 29 teachers at the school were interviewed individually about what they believed contributed to the improved learning outcomes.

To ensure validity and verify the main findings from the interviews, we subsequently distributed an anonymous online questionnaire in which teachers were asked to rate 15 statements on a five-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Inspired by a Delphi-based

approach (Rice & Hooley, 2024), commonly used in educational research (Green, 2014), the aim was to reduce uncertainty in our data and achieve a well-informed assessment.

A consistent finding from both steps was that school leadership was highlighted as a decisive factor in the school's positive turnaround. Step three therefore consisted of interviews with the principals, with the aim of exploring their approaches to leadership, pedagogical values, and perspectives on learning culture.

References

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