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Young people's choice of education between inclination and obligation

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1. Introduction

In the Danish education policy and among the young people themselves an active discourse is “*young people have so many alternatives*”. Research in this field shows – depending on the approach – different understandings of the young people's options. It can e.g. be understood as reproduction of the social and cultural position of the parents, or it can be understood as a choice among a lot of equal alternatives. Some research emphasizes how difficult young people find the choice of education, and all those choices makes it a hard time to be young.

Having many options means you must make a choice and you have to make the right choice. Using the term choice introduces the existence of several alternatives and the point is to choose the right education quickly and at the first time in order to minimize drop outs and changes of choices. One argument is the economy and another one is the competition with other countries (in Denmark the average age for graduating is relatively high).

The Danish educational policy tries within the educations to change the structure and the didactic. The starting point is to consider both the demands of the labour marked and the inclination of the young people by giving the students more options as regards the level and order of the content and different ways of studying. In other words individualization and more options is a trend in the Danish educational policy, and all youth educations are becoming more individualized and the students get more options. Such changes challenge the research question not only to put focus on the choice *of* education but choices *in* education as well.

During the last 10 years we have got a lot of reforms within the educational system. The aims of these reforms are to make the educations more effectively, roomy and up-to-date and an important argument for some of those educational reforms is the contemporary youth which is understood as fragmented, fluttering and individualists. One of the most obvious examples is the reform of the vocational educational system in 2000 which be due to the fact of a particular understanding of young people of today (Koudahl, 2004).

In the research project ‘Gymnasiereform 2005’ we are a group of four researchers who follow the process of implementing the new reform of upper secondary school.¹ We look at it from the perspective of local school management, teachers and students. The reform was put to effect in August 2005, but before that much preliminary work had to be done at school level and thus much

¹ Besides me the following researchers participate in ‘Gymnasiereform 2005’: Katrin Hjort, The Danish University of Education, Peter Henrik Raae, University of Southern Denmark and Jakob Ditlev Boye, Roskilde University.

of the empirical material produces so far relates to the preparation process. In this paper I will draw upon some of that material.

The question I which to address is: what significance has the reform to our understanding of young people's choice of education? A few years ago the students often used an argumentation based on what they wanted – inclination -, and now it is (also) based on their rights and obligations. So the aim of this paper is to discuss this new trend and new discourse in young people's choice of education. Where does it come from, and is many options and alternatives the right answer to contemporary youth?

Concerning the theoretical and methodological approach of the paper I will draw on theory about contemporary youth and different theoretical approach to understand the choice of education of young people.

2. What is choice?

As it appears from above 'choice' are two different things. It is to want something – there is a desiring subject who wants something. And it is a right as a more or less equal sharing of well fare goods.

In general the tendency seems to be more options at more different levels combined with still stronger societal and political demands to young people having a plan for their future, to participate in education and rather not drop out or change the choice. An important consequence of the societal development is that education has become a preposition to all young people both as a reality at the labour market and as a policy statement. In Denmark the social policy has changed from passive support to actively effort and this make the demands to the young people bigger having an educational plan. This means that the demand making a choice in many different ways and at different levels has become bigger.

Here it can be worth remembering that the result of more and many options not necessary provide decision making, as it depends on which conscious and unconscious considerations and dynamics are getting activated.

So fore many good societal, political and subjective reasons it is obvious to put focus on 'choice' and in theoretical conceptual sense on the term or category 'choice' (Larsen & Larsen, 2005)

In the Danish research about young people's choice of education we find different approaches:

It is social reproduction where social and cultural traditions and patterns are continued (e.g. Hansen, 1995).

It is a rational choice in which conscious and rational decisions are made with a view to reach a definite goal (e.g. Jensen, 1997).

It is an act of selection in which the base of the choice is some definite values and ethical attitudes to what is good and bad and right and wrong (e.g. Zeuner, 2000).

It is social position making and construction were you during a definite choice try to make a social position (e.g. Hutter, 2001, 2004).

It is an identity process based on life history and linked to earlier life history experiences (e.g. Larsen, 2003 and 2005).

Those different positions and different ways of understanding 'choice' of course not are seen very often so separated as mentioned above, and often we see them combined in different ways and some of them draw on each other.

3. A life history approach

Theoretical and empirical it is thoroughly investigated how the social recruitment to education still is unequal, and one of the important functions of the educational system is to sort and select the future labour force (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977, Masuch, 1974, Hansen, 1995). Besides such structural limitations the Life History Research shows that the choices is subjectively tied to relations and events earlier in the life time – and therefore not 'free' either².

The starting point in this approach is that the societal modernization- and differentiating processes make changes in the socialisation and changes in the life course. The modern sociologists talk about the replacement of the normal biography with a 'biography of choice' (Beck, 1997). Class, gender and generation are still important points of orientation, but their usefulness to predict actual life courses is essentially reduced. Collective biographical patterns are moved by individual risks (Alheit, 1995). It has become a 'permanent biographical question' to decide one's attitude to who you are, how you are and who you make identification to. The biographical meaning is less than ever taken for granted, but instead it has to be constructed on the basic of new options, which means subjective strain and looking for meaning (Ziehe, 1989).

The term 'cultural modernization' gives a lot of food to the Danish youth research and the discussion about the many choices. This concept tries to catch the societal and subjective processes of change. Cultural modernization does not mean we have become freer but an extent of what you can expect, dream about and be longing after in your life – even it cannot be fulfilled. Thomas Ziehe points out the ambivalences in the process of cultural modernization because the liberation from those values and norms the subject historically has identified to has a backside of the medal in which definite forms of subjective strain get bigger and the inner contradictions grows (Ziehe, 1983).

A Life History approach is asking the question about the subjective processing of the social life and vital necessities and the changes of the subjectivity in the societal processes of transformation. In this context we can put the question this way: How are different young people handling the contradictions and doubleness in the disintegration of the normal biography and the cultural modernization. How do the young people find their right shelf while it continuously is rebuilt? (Weber, 2003).

In the educational policy discourse choice is traditionally understood as the *result* of rational and conscious considerations and decisions, and the individual is doing what seems to be most

² This refers to the work of a Life History Research Project at Roskilde University. This project contributes to a theoretical clarification of the relationship between learning, participation in education and life history and tries to develop methods to investigate this relationship. The project is conducted by Professor Henning Salling Olesen.

reasonable in the given situation. On one hand choice is understood as being free and on the other hand determined by e.g. social heritage, lacking literacy, restricted entry. This means as an outside relation between inner and out and the result of well considered actions.

The theoretical understanding of choice in this paper is that the choice both is influenced by the structures of society, subjective actions and processes – both inner and outer.

In general the choice has an object when you always choose something or somebody. This demands different kinds of considerations depending on the situation and the significance of the choice and its bindings to different emotional levels. There is a big difference in what you have to choose and how and when and by whom in which situations. Of course those different kinds and forms of choice involve different emotional levels and experiences depending on the character and the significance of the choice and the life history of the individual (Larsen, 2001).

To make a choice can be understood as an action: somebody is doing something with somebody or something. This means there is both a subject and an object, and when you are doing something there is something you don't do – there is something you choose not to take. In most cases this presupposes that you have made a decision in the attempt to make an agreement between inner and outer reality – between the societal and cultural possibilities and the subjectivity (Nielsen & Rudberg, 1993).

In some situations the outer reality does not agree with your inner dreams and imaginations, e.g. you want to be a carpenter and there are no trainee jobs - or the opposite situation: there are a lot of outer possibilities but they don't agree with your dreams and imaginations. There fore the ability to make a choice is not something you have or something you do not have, but a potential the subject can show in given situations under given circumstances.

Such kind of processes don't get easier to understand in fact the subject usually not is conscious about them and what the inner dynamics are tied to and steered by – but they are present in the body and the emotions. This means that many unconscious and very basic dynamics are running when you have to make a choice of education or labour, and such choices are made through and in continuation of the life history of the individual.

The basic understanding in this paper is that the choice both is structures, acting and processes at the same time. The choice of education is a social acting influenced by social and societal structures; it reproduces the structures and contributes to transform the societal and social structures. The acting is one of at lot of social acting and incidents in the life course of the subject and has subjective significance to the individual. There fore the choice of education is a social and biographical process which is enrolled in the whole life history. This means that you cannot understand the choice as a clear number of one by one goal oriented and well argued acting. In stead it is first of all a process of a lot of different acting and not all of them are rational. The choice is an identity process tied to the life history which means that the choice is understood as a dynamic process more than a result – an inner relation and process between inner desires and objective structures (Larsen & Larsen, 2005).

4. From free choice to rational choice

In our research group project about the reform of the secondary upper school ('Gymnasiereform 2005') we think we can see a change in the way the choices have to be made. In the last decade of the last century the *personal* freedom was in focus and the paradigm was *inclination and options*. The philosophy was free choice, and information was defined and understood as orientation about the variety of alternatives. Related to education the educational policy put focus on more options to the students and a construction of the students as members of a professional and social community at school.

Since then the way of govern has change and now the marked running organization of education is realized. The public institutions have become private business at a marked.

This paradigm has not personal freedom as central but *economic* freedom and the paradigm is rationality/sense and goal orientation. The free choice is substituted of the *rational* choice, and information is understood as information which makes it possible to calculate how to reach the goal. This includes a construction of the students as users and customers who are able to make a rational choice. This contains a paradox: to be rational the choice presupposes information which makes it possible to calculate risks and investments.

Earlier the students could complain that the education was not democratic enough because the teachers had planned everything and had all the right answers. There fore they wanted more influence. Now the students are complaining that they don't get as many choices as promised or the information is not enough as necessary to make a rational choice.

This has first of all something to do with the change in the political governing of the country and a change in the liberal policy and the understanding of what liberal means – which I will not get into in this context.

One of the aims with the reform of the secondary upper school is to give the students more options both between so called 'study directions' and different ways of studying.

The reform implies a choice of 'study direction' in the 9 class in which the students are about 15 – 16 years old.³ The choice of 'study direction' has consequences for their future in fact it influences their possibilities in the long advanced education system. At this moment we don't have much empirical material about the students but mostly with head masters and teachers which means that I am not able to present an analysis which make the points probable. Therefore I will take an example from another context.

Some of the students feel cheated in many different ways. An example of this is what two students write in the newspaper: "*When we had to choose which gymnasium we wanted the teachers in primary school didn't know any thing about the reform of the secondary upper school. We didn't knew anything about the entry demands of theso we didn't have a chance to choose 'study direction' from those. Moreover we didn't know any thing about the content of the different subjects in the secondary upper school at that time we had to choose a 'study direction'. When we entered the upper secondary school we got more disappointed because the first semester was organised as a*

³ Secondary upper School is a three year long education which qualifies to the long advanced education system. Before the students start they have to choose a so called 'study direction' which make preference to two or three subjects.

basic course which is common for all the students. And still we are not informed well enough about the 'study directions' so we still do not know what we are choosing".⁴

In this argumentation two discourses become clear: 'rights' and 'information', and they are closely attached to each other. This change in the discourse is linked to the change of the school from a public institution to a political company and activity. Before 2005 the secondary upper school was a public institution (like other institutions in Denmark), but in the mean time the political situation has changed and the main tendency is the construction of a marked and market-making, and the institutions are in big competition with each other. That is a change in the understanding of liberal of the government.

These changes involve so called 'social contracts' between the administration and the citizen as one among other tools to break the social heritage. Social contracts are used in several fields e.g. are youth contracts used as replacement for punishment. In an education context contracts are used as a part of an evaluation system with periodical conversations about the personal and professional development of the student.⁵

Referring to Niels Åkerstrøm Andersen the general form of the contract is the unity of duty and freedom and of inclination and obligation. The form of the social contract let freedom re-enter as a kind of duty and obligation. The individual is not free at the starting point. He or she has to choose his or hers freedom, and the social contract is an obligation to this choice. Social contracts are to put freedom into the frame of negotiation. We get negotiated freedom (Åkerstrøm Andersen, 2003). In the light of this the student's complaint over the missing information can be understood as the other side of the social contract. If we are going to make a rational choice and feel it like a free choice we need enough information. This is the negotiation.

In a text from one of our observations of a meeting with teachers in a secondary upper school we can see examples how the teachers try to make contracts with the students. One of them is as below:

Benny:

"This means you have to be sure that all your students write something in that report. You are not doing it your self. You shall not comment what they write, but you have to make sure that all of them are writing something in it."

Christine:

"What are they going to write about?"

Benny:

"They have to write about the outcome of it."

Christine:

"Who has to keep a tight rein on them?"

Benny:

"Them selves. You make sure they are doing it, but the keep a tight rein to them selves."

⁴ Berlingske Tidende 27.10.05 (a big Danish Newspaper).

⁵ This is not only a Danish phenomenon. In other well fare states like Australia, New Zealand and England you can see the same phenomena.

What we can see here is the teachers making contract with the students about what they have to do. The teachers do not have to correct the student's reports but make a contract with the students who have to do it themselves – to learn to learn or responsibility to your own learning. This implies the students make a contract with themselves to get it done.

The other complaint in the quotation from the newspaper is the decisions about the future the students have to make before they start in the secondary upper school. To get into the long advanced education system you need different marks in different studies which mean that you have to decide which subjects you want at a high level in secondary upper school. And a lot of students in the end of primary school and in the beginning of the secondary upper school do not know what they want to be, what kind of further study they prefer and what kind of work they would like years from now. And again: to make the right choice they do not have enough information.

The tendency we think we can see to talk about rational choice more than free choice means that in Denmark the question about the young people's choice of education has to be put in another and in a new way. It is not any longer based on theory about the differentiated and cultural modernized young people, but now it is instead a question about controlling and handling the choices. If this tendency is correct it also puts the demands to the research in a new way. In our research project we try to catch this change during the analytical categories 'free choice' and 'rational choice' and we try to define the field as a stretch between inclination and obligation. And we are only in the very beginning of it. I find it important to emphasise that 'free choice' and 'rational choice' are analytical categories not empirical phenomena.

5. Between inclination and obligation

As mentioned earlier some of the reforms in The Danish Education System is based on theory about and characterizes of contemporary youth where the logic seems to be individualized and fluttering young people want individualized education with a lot of options and many changes.

One question is: How is the problem diagnosed as an argument for making an educational reform? Earlier e.g. when the vocational education system in Denmark got a new reform in 2000 the main problem was diagnosed as 'too many drop outs'. Therefore we need some changes. Contemporary youth is completely different from earlier – therefore we need more differentiated and individualized educations. The point is a question about the psychology of the young people.

The reform of the upper secondary school does not use characterize of contemporary youth as main argumentation but among other things especially the development of competences. We think the secondary upper school has not the same problem as the vocational training. There are not so many drops out in the upper secondary school and it is a rather popular education among young people – and their parents. So this educational system does not have to listen so much to the psychology of the young people. The problem is diagnosed as a controlling and handling problem.

We have started to analyze if – and how – the reform of the upper secondary school has a position between free choice on one hand and rational choice on the other hand, and a position between inclination and obligation. On one hand we have the marked driven school which wants costumers in the shop, and therefore it has to pay attention to the inclination of the young people. The young people themselves of course want to get their wishes fulfilled, and if they had to be costumers at

the market there must be many offers. Therefore the upper secondary schools offered a lot of different 'study directions' among which the students could choose – many of them were very creative to attract creative students. But the students got split: they wanted both to make a goal oriented choice in consideration to their educational future and they wanted to make a choice based on their inclinations.

The students have the opportunity to change their choice after the first semester – December 2005 – and as far as we know a lot of students have changed their choice of 'study direction' and made a pretty chaotic situation at the school and the horror picture for the headmasters and teachers is emptied classes.

On the other hand we have the system which needs to control and handle the ways in and out of the educational system at the general level. At a local school level the headmasters have to control the choices of the students for different reasons. The overall objective is to make the educational system more effective. The government's proposal to the council of globalization has three strategies to make the Danish educational system among one of the best in the world: 1) a strategy for internationalising the educations, 2) the students have to graduate earlier and 3) the secondary upper school has to be better preparing the students to further education.⁶ All the initiatives in this proposal are suggested as an ambition of the government to control the educations. And an important element in this controlling is that the students make rational goal oriented choices.

So the point here is that the reform of the secondary upper school is stretched out between inclination and obligation and stretches the students out between free choice and rational choice. Some of our future research will try to analyze this more deeply, theoretically and empirically in an attempt to contribute to the lacking research in young people's choices *within* education. To understand the logic and dynamics in the reform of the upper secondary school we have to put the research question in another way.

In the beginning of this paper I also put the question if many options and alternatives are the right answer to contemporary youth. Maybe education instead should offer coherence, absorption and collective learning processes (Salling Olesen, 2003). Learning is at the same time a cognitive, emotional and social changing process to the learner and in fact the young people have to stay in the educational system for many years it has the chance to be an important area for identity processes - and fragmentation is not the best answer to that.

⁶ Denmark in the global economy, the proposal of the government 1. and 2. December 2005.

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