More than a matter of qualification: Teachers' thoughts on the purpose of social studies and history teaching in vocational preparation programmes in Swedish upper-secondary school

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to increase our understanding of how history and social studies teachers in vocational preparation programmes (VET) in Sweden relate to the obligation of preparing students for their future lives as citizens. Previous research on VET programmes has primarily emphasised predetermined roles of education. Different critical perspectives have established how different VET practices contribute to reproducing specific values and a type of knowledge that leaves less room for students to act as independent subjects. In part, the findings of this article contribute to problematising such a description. In a series of interviews, teachers expressed what can best be described as a clear will to prepare students for a future as broadminded and tolerant citizens. The multi-perspective approach emphasised by these teachers not only illustrates the socialisation and qualification functions of education, it also gives prominence to the importance of student subjectification. Furthermore, this article stresses that the teachers do not view the question of the purpose of their subjects in terms of either/or. Rather, it suggests they see their obligations as a matter of professional judgment and customised responses to unique didactic situations.

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Introduction: The vocational student and society – more than a matter of qualification

What purpose do schools actually have? In an international comparison, Sweden invests a great deal of resources on vocational upper-secondary education. The reason for this is largely economic (Ledman, 2014; Rosvall, 2020). Future professionals are expected to have the necessary qualifications and skills that (presumably) will make them employable, and potentially retrainable, given the requirements that are predicted to characterise the labour market of the future (cf. Colley et al., 2003; Eriksdottir and Rosvall, 2019; Wildemeersch et al., 2020).

However, the explanation for why the Swedish state, even from a national perspective, allocates such significant resources to training nursing staff, construction workers, and vehicle technicians does not seem to be solely a question of presumed socio-economic benefit (Ledman, 2015). Not only are vocational programmes taught in Swedish upper-secondary schools alongside the more traditional “academic” curriculum, but since 1994, these programmes have been three years long and because of their theoretical elements, they can grant eligibility for higher education. Regardless of programme choice, be it “academic” or vocational, all students must take at least one course in social studies and one in history, which in total corresponds to about 5% of teaching. The VET programme as a whole, therefore, not only covers the practical elements of students’ future work, but it also aims to prepare students to be democratic citizens (Skolverket, 2011). For example, the first chapter of the national vocational curriculum states that:

The task of the school is to encourage all students to discover their own uniqueness as individuals and thereby actively participate in the life of society by giving of their best in responsible freedom. [...] Education should support the development of students into responsible persons who actively participate in and contribute to professional and societal life. It should contribute to the all-round development of the student. [...] Students should develop their ability to think critically, examine facts and relationships, and appreciate the consequences of different alternatives. By these means students will come closer to scientific ways of thinking and working. (Skolverket, 2011, p. 3–4)

In these programme-wide goals, as well as in the national curricula for the courses in history and social studies, an idea is thus accentuated that in other contexts has been described in terms of emancipation, greater scope for action, and increased agency. In addition to the more instrumentalist function of vocational education – that being to produce highly-skilled workers – the Swedish curriculum seems to rest on a notion that by teaching social subjects, schools can expand students’ understanding of who they as individuals can become and how they, by way of their actions and the actions of others, can influence society and the world around them (Skolverket, 2011). However, knowledge about how teachers implement and understand this aspect of their teaching is limited. Therefore, in this article we are interested in how teachers of social studies and history in vocational preparation programmes view this obligation.

The perspective of the teaching professional and the teacher’s obligation in vocational education and teaching (VET) practices

This article is based on what we in previous contexts have referred to as the perspective of the teaching professional (cf. e.g., Persson and Berg, 2021). In this conceptualisation, the teacher’s approach to teaching is characterised by the often unpredictable, complex, and uniquely situated didactic situations that constantly need to be evaluated and assessed (Biesta, 2009b, 2015, 2017a; Frelin, 2014; Hopmann, 2008; Schön, 1983). From the perspective of the teaching professional, the

logic of teaching is thus characterised to a lesser extent by repetition and predictability. However, the steady stream of unexpected events and unpredictable interpersonal encounters in a classroom creates a form of complex compounded conditions that do not correspond unequivocally to an obvious way of acting (Biesta, 2017a; Persson, 2017). The teacher's approach is not based on always understanding the most obvious and best course of action. Instead, it navigates to what we describe as a kind of space where there is opportunity for many different conceivable positions (cf. Authors). In this article, our interest is directed towards subjectification demands that are actualised in a specific educational context (vocational education) and through two specific school subjects (history and social studies).

To some extent, it can be said that education is always about reproducing pre-existing knowledge and abilities (Biesta, 2011, 2020). This relationship is particularly clear when it comes to vocational education and training (VET). Professionalism has often been associated with the acquisition of specialised experiences and skills that are to be passed on from one cadre to another. In some contexts, it has been pointed out how such profession-forming processes are closely surrounded by profession-specific norms and values (Colley, et al., 2003; Leeman and Volman, 2021).

VET is not the only form of education that can be seen in instrumentalist terms. In many contexts, civic education has also been associated with a fixed set of political goals. For example, efforts to reinforce democratic values in schools have been operationalised in the form of pre-defined competencies and preconceived values within many citizenship education programmes (cf. Olson, 2009; Sandahl, 2015). As already stated, however, teaching does not have to be understood in terms of solely teaching something pre-determined or inculcating a pre-set way of thinking and being. Given that the teaching process can involve one person communicating with another in a unique, didactic, and situated meeting between teacher, student, and subject content, the transference of knowledge can also lead to things that have not been planned (cf. Persson and Berg, 2021). This article is therefore based on the premise that the work of the professional teacher (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012; Hopmann, 2008; Schön, 1983), in addition to transferring knowledge (what Biesta calls 'qualification'), can also be described in terms of a tension between the other two functions of education that Biesta (2009a, 2015, 2020) identifies, namely socialisation and subjectification. On the one hand, teaching always contributes to the reproduction of prevailing opinions and values. Students are educated in something already well-established; they can be shaped to fit the existing social and cultural life. On the other hand, teaching can also allow for renewed ways of understanding oneself and others (Biesta, 2009a).

In their teaching of individual subjects, teachers deal with the tension between meeting the expectations of contemporary society on the one hand and, on the other, seeking to contribute to the opportunities young people have to change this society. The professional teacher can thus be said to oscillate between presenting what is already there and leaving enough space for individual students, together with others in the classroom, to act in unexpected and original ways (cf. Persson and Berg, 2021). However, we know very little about this didactic dilemma (Liljestrand, 2014) or about how the balance between what exists and what has yet to exist is dealt with in school. Accordingly, we know even less about the way this didactic balance operates in a vocational educational context and the individual subjects that it comprises (Tur Porres et al., 2014).

In this article, attention is on how teachers of history and social studies in vocational preparation programmes at the upper-secondary school level in Sweden view this classic didactic balance. Our primary aim is to increase an understanding of how these professionals within this particular educational context relate to the task of preparing students for their future lives as citizens. More precisely, our approach can be said to answer two complex questions:

In teachers' discussions about the purpose of history, what (understanding) is revealed about their attitudes concerning what it is to be a good citizen?

In their discussions about how teaching can broaden students' perceptions of the present and the future, how do teachers' pedagogical endeavours interact with the emancipatory function of their subject?

Previous research

The purpose of this article is to examine teacher proficiency in relation to three spheres of interest, each of which constitutes a well-established and extensive research area:

1. Education's civic and citizenship function
2. Vocational upper-secondary school education
3. The didactics of history and social studies

The first of these research areas, education's civic and citizenship function, is undoubtedly the largest. The interest in investigating how prospective and active teachers perceive concepts such as citizenship and democracy is considerable (see, e.g., Anderson et al., 1997; Estelles and Romero, 2019; Faden, 2012; Hahn, 2015; Logan, 2011; Marri et al., 2014; Martin, 2008, 2010; Patterson et al., 2012). In some cases, studies have dealt with teachers' ways of viewing the meaning of good citizenship (Bramwell, 2020; Martin et al., 2013; Prior, 1999). In other cases, the starting point has been a comparative study of teachers' perceptions of citizenship in different countries (Hung, 2013; Martínez-Rodríguez et al., 2019) or the identified gap between what citizenship teachers describe as their ideals and the actual teaching practices observed by researchers (Cohen, 2016). Most often, these studies have dealt with other educational contexts than VET practices. Only in a few cases have researchers focused on how teachers active in vocational education view the civic and emancipatory potential of their own teaching. In these studies, teachers' voices were analysed from an existing theoretical perspective: for example, Rancière's view of *intellectual emancipation* (Wildemeersch et al., 2020) or Sennett's thoughts on *the development of craftsmanship as citizenship* (Leeman and Volman, 2021). Much of this research, like civic research in general, seems to be based on definitions of the purpose and goals of education that are already in place. Perhaps this is why teachers' unwillingness or, indeed, inability in the area of citizenship education is often emphasised. As already indicated, researchers' interest is often directed towards how different types of regulatory discourses both shape and limit the interaction between teacher and student (Ledman et al., 2018). Research on vocational education in the third world has tended to place the liberation of the individual at the centre and in contrast to citizenship education, has instead focused on issues relating to autonomy, financial security, and the socially inclusive potential of professional knowledge itself (Lin, 2017; Tur Porres et al., 2014).

When the role of civic education or the emancipatory potential of teaching has been examined from the didactic perspective of history or social science, the research focus has often been on contexts other than vocational education (see, e.g., Hahn, 2015; Persson 2017; Sandahl, 2015; Strandler, 2017). The studies that have looked at these areas have seldom been oriented around a particular school subject. When the role of civic education in vocational preparation programmes has been examined, the studies have more often been based on different educational sociology perspectives (cf. Holtsch et al., 2019; Ledman et al., 2018; Rosvall et al., 2018). In both these and in the less frequent cases, where the more general pedagogical aspects of the civic function and emancipatory potential of vocational education have been studied, the aim has usually been to examine the qualifying and socialising effects of the teaching (cf. Biesta, 2011, 2020). Research has repeatedly established the value-reproducing function of such education (Tur Porres et al., 2014) and it is the

teacher's resistance to this process, not their own endeavours to manage or work with it, that tends to be highlighted.

In the last decade, of the research in Sweden that has focused on subject didactics, some of it has investigated social studies and history teaching in vocational preparation programmes. In several cases, the studies have been based on comparisons between teaching in academic and vocational preparation programmes. This work has been generated by four individual researchers. In a study of teachers' assessment practices, Odenstad (2010) found that vocational students more often than those studying academic subjects receive tasks of a simpler and repetitive factual nature. Her conclusion is similar in this respect to that of Ledman (2015), who also notes how students in an academic study programme appear to a greater extent to be trained in the skills of independent analysis and critical-thinking. Using other methods and concluding with somewhat different results, the studies carried out by Forsberg and Andersson (Andersson, 2015; Forsberg, 2011) have sought to investigate how this category of vocational student, in comparison to that of the academic student, responds to deliberately arranged social studies teaching (Andersson, 2015). These results might be understood to suggest that teachers do not value the citizenship function of education in citizenship programmes to the same extent as they do in academic programmes. Yet, little is actually known about what teachers themselves think about citizenship education, and even less about what they might wish for it.

Research contribution of this article

All in all, it is striking the extent to which previous research on how teachers view the purpose of vocational education has been based on pre-existing assumptions and critically-oriented theories and explanatory models. Several of the published conclusions suggest that the expectations policy-makers and teachers have of vocational students' know-how almost risk limiting the opportunities these students have to be active citizens. The research to date offers few examples where the actual content of history and social studies teaching, that is, the specific stories teachers relate about citizenship, the future and civil society, are illuminated from an inductively-oriented professional teaching perspective. In previous studies, focus has been on the general didactic challenges that are associated with the teacher's efforts to broaden the way students look at themselves and society. In this study, however, the focus is on teachers' own pedagogical endeavours and their understanding of such didactic dilemmas from a subject perspective.

Method

From the perspective of the pedagogical scholar, where education is ultimately seen to be a matter of a space of infinite conceivable positions (Persson and Berg, 2021), a central task will always be to examine how teachers understand their subject and the subjects they teach (cf. Berg, 2014; Cotton Deborah, 2006). An important role of such educational research is to make this process visible and to seek to explain it. By allowing teachers to explain what their pedagogical endeavours and understandings are and how and why they act as they do, the researcher can put their words into a broader context and thus contribute to further professional reflection (Schön, 1983).

This article is based on data from three focus group interviews with five teachers who teach social studies and history in vocational programmes at an upper-secondary school in central Sweden. The interviews were conducted within the framework of a major two-year research project and the data collection took place in the autumn of 2020. The school in question is located in a region that has long been associated with mining and forestry as well as other traditional export-oriented industries. The interviewed teachers thus work in a rural location with a limited

higher education sector and an economic base that is clearly being challenged by different expressions of globalisation (sf Waterson and Moffa, 2016). While the catchment area of the selected school is clearly different from that of larger coastal cities in Sweden, like Stockholm, Malmö and Gothenburg, the selection of teachers was more general. These particular teachers were interviewed because they were the ones at the school who had experience of teaching history and social studies in vocational preparation programmes. Of the five teachers, two were men and three were women. They were all qualified teachers, with professional experience ranging from between four and twenty-two years.

The focus group interviews took place over approximately two months and were held on three separate occasions. Each interview was between 90 and 120 min long and was conducted using a digital meeting tool (Zoom). The meetings were recorded and then later transcribed by an external service. The interviews can be described as semi-structured. Two researchers took turns asking the primary questions, after which they asked a series of follow-up questions. For the interviews, the interviewers employed different methods. The first interview asked the five teachers to comment on the narratives about society that they encounter among their students. Three ‘stories’ featured most strongly. The first two revolved around the relationship between rural and urban life and the third emphasised climate and environmental issues. These stories then formed the basis for the following two focus group interviews where the teachers had to explain how and why, and using what content and what methods, they would have chosen to address these student narratives. The wording of the individual questions was based on a series of interviews that were conducted at the same school during the period 2018–2019. The schedule for the three focus group interviews can be found in Appendix X. Although the theme of these earlier interviews was somewhat different, the conversations still concerned the question of the teacher’s role in teaching history and social studies and the way in which these subjects can contribute to young people today.

The focus group interviews conducted for this article can thus be seen as a means to further the understanding of how teachers of history and social studies view their subjects. Further, focus group interviews have the advantage of taking on the character of question/answer to a lesser extent than is the case with traditional individual interviews. Giving the participants the opportunity to respond to each other creates a dynamic that is closer to a conversation than a formal interview (e.g. Berg and Persson, 2020). We sought to interpret the substance of the conversations we had with the teachers in this study in terms of their own beliefs, aims and pedagogical endeavours rather than in terms of a predetermined idea of the form their teaching should take. The ambition with the interviews was to actualise “theory in use” rather than to test any one type of “espoused theory” (Argyris and Schön, 1974).

Analysis

This inductive approach also characterised the analysis phase of this study. From the transcribed material, statements that expressed ideas about the civic potential of teaching in particular were identified. These statements were then coded and grouped in the manner described in the results section below. The process of interpretation can itself be described as occurring by way of several steps. In our analysis, we took as our starting point the teachers’ own understandings of the phenomena they describe. This method can also be described as a form of analytical induction. We examined short sections of data in order to actively seek to test the possible interpretations that the material actualised. In searching for manifestations of these interpretations, both the transcriptions from the first focus group interview, on young people’s stories, and the two subsequent interviews, on how and what the teachers think they can do to work with these stories, were analysed. In both cases, the focus was on trying to identify different expressions of what the perception of a good

citizen is and how this corresponds to different ways of thinking about teaching. The thematic categories that thus emerged have been used to structure the results section of the article. The statements presented in this study can only be considered as representative of the specific group of teachers who were interviewed. However, the ambition is that these comments and reflections open up a discussion that through “theoretical inference” (Hammersley, 2007) can contribute more generally relevant knowledge.

Findings

D2: The long-term purpose is in some way to enrich students’ lives and a little of what A. said: to create a, yes, but if you take it a bit seriously ..., it’s to create a better society. No, but if you have citizens who have one-sided views, then it becomes a sort of society where you just stand and shout at each other and don’t understand each other.

The teacher whose statement is reproduced in the quote above is talking about how the purpose of teaching is ultimately about creating a better society. This idea of education as a societal benefit is often articulated in other contexts: society wants citizens who are educated to act democratically, and the individual student is thus assumed to be given a greater opportunity to assert their own interests (cf. Olson, 2009). However, as the quote above shows, when considering the purpose of history and social studies teaching, teachers also express a desire to enrich students’ lives. In close connection with these reasonings, teachers seem to emphasise in particular the value of a perspective-rich relationship to existence. Later in the interview, when the teacher, together with colleagues, develops these thoughts, the societal and student-oriented ambitions are frequently linked in a consistent attempt to seek to deepen people’s understanding of themselves and others. The teachers’ understanding of the purpose of their own teaching also illustrates Biesta’s functions of education as socialisation, qualification, and subjectification (cf. Biesta, 2011, 2020).

Multi-perspectivism as socialisation

In some respects, the teachers’ statements about the purpose of their teaching leads in the direction of what can ultimately be described as a kind of educative and attitude-influencing claim. However, these socialising aspirations do not seem to be tied to ready-made positions or values. For the teachers in this study, the good citizen appears rather as someone who looks at life and the world from more than one perspective.

A2: My spontaneous reaction to whether we should quarrel with the story is yes, I think we should mess with all the stories that the students have. It is our job, yes, but as we were saying, to present new perspectives and new angles. We, it’s on the first page of, you know, the curriculum, that we should form good citizens. They do have different perspectives and realise that it may not be a party in parliament that is behind all the bad stuff that happens in their lives; instead, it’s more than just that.

When talking about arguing with students’ stories, the teacher (extract above) is suggesting that their role involves contributing new perspectives on issues where students appear to be too absolute. This attitude also articulates the purpose of social studies and history teaching consistently in terms of seeking to offer additional and alternative ways of looking at oneself, at others, and at society.

A2: You achieve, yes, first I think you achieve a frustration in the student, like “what is she going to do and say because I think as I think, it’s their fault, end of story.” But I still believe that you can awaken an

understanding that there are different perspectives, and that all perspectives have a part in how the world looks today.

Almost regardless of the attitude a student has, teachers seem to see it as their task to point to alternative ways of looking at a situation. To have students change perspective, the school thus needs to contribute *alternative*, and distinct, ways of thinking about society at large.

D2: No, but I agree with A. that, (-) (it's) the school's mission (-) to show, (that it's) to be able to show different ways of thinking about and perceiving the world. That it isn't one-dimensional, that the world has many dimensions and that it can appear different depending on how you look at it. And just like helping students and saying okay that is your perspective, if you take a different perspective, if you change (gender), what happens then? If you change age, what happens then? If you change here in our town for Stockholm and so on.

In this context, the teachers also emphasise the importance of students being able to realise and accept that there are many perceptions of the world. In talking about the necessity of such a mutual understanding, one of the teachers referred to the clear polarisation of opinions that they encountered in the classroom. The town where they teach has been ruled by the social democrats for almost a century. But, during the last decade it is also been associated with rural conservatism and occasional outbursts of popular neo-Nazism. Here, there are not only those who express opinions that are often associated with political correctness, but also those who clearly express the desire to preserve a culture that has come to be associated with the traditional society of the local rural area. The teachers' starting point seems to be that both these groups need to understand each other. Perhaps the conversation about understanding the other reaches its limit when the local anti-democratic grouping also comes up in discussion. A teacher talks about how he approaches the task of teaching the children of this group. Even in this extreme case, there are efforts to try to disturb these young people in their existing thoughts and opinions in an attempt to try to broaden the way they look at themselves and others.

In close connection with discussion about the expediency of multi-perspectivism, the teachers in this study also emphasise the importance of learning to show respect for the differing views of others in school. The teachers describe how they seek to have students adopt more nuanced opinions and to have them be more curious about, and sensitive to, the positions of others. Even if they do not articulate any particular opinions, there remains a clear will to seek to help open the minds of students and make them more tolerant through the teaching of social studies and history.

Multi-perspectivism as qualification

As already stated in the section above, teachers consistently emphasise the importance of trying to make students recognise that their own position is not the only right one. They describe the good citizen as someone who wants and is able to listen to and learn from others. However, the main attitude-changing ambitions that teachers discuss do not relate only to values such as tolerance, broadmindedness, and respect. The understanding that the world is never one-dimensional and that most things can be viewed from several perspectives also appears in their conversations as a kind of knowledge or ability. In other articles, we describe how teachers in various ways seek to work with these more qualification-oriented ambitions (cf. Berg and Persson, 2020; Persson and Berg, 2021).

The multi-perspectivism that the teachers strive for thus seems also to be about something that can be learned and developed. In addition to having students recognise other perspectives, the

opportunity to get them to look at issues in different ways is associated with both a kind of empathy-related imagination and self-critical practiced distance to the teachers' own perceptions. On several occasions, the teachers stated the importance of their having the ability, as future citizens, to understand the origins of their own opinions. For example, they talked about how knowing yourself makes it easier to understand others.

R2: On the other hand, A. has a very good point there, that it's a bit difficult to pick the right tool out of the toolbox if you don't already have a clear definition of yourself – that is to say, some form of identification. If you know yourself where you are, then maybe it'll be easier to be competent when you judge and deal with other people. Mm, you probably need a mix of the two.

If some of the teachers' statements in this regard also touch on the question of the inevitable historicity of existence and the importance of making it conscious, other comments point to the importance of consistently trying to understand where other points of view come from.

R2: Even if you have a set of values that is in line with what the school should have, you must still be able to understand the people who don't have it, otherwise you can never address them either. So that, of course, they must be challenged, but their beliefs also must be justified. Yes, and maybe we need to understand a little why they have them, because throughout their lives they will meet people who don't have the same values, just as they'll meet people who don't have the same political values or opinions, and they need to understand them, otherwise there won't be a conversation.

The broadmindedness that the teachers talk about here does not seem to be associated simply with the educational dimension of teaching. Their ideas of conscious broadmindedness, awareness, and perspective-taking seem also to be associated with a kind of knowledge that teachers, through teaching, can contribute to personal development.

Multi-perspectivism as subjectification

As stated in the sections above, the teachers' discussions about the purpose of history and social studies as school subjects contain dimensions of both socialisation and qualification. However, in the expressed desire to leave students to form their own opinions, a clear picture of what Biesta describes as a subjectification understanding of the function of the subjects of history and social studies also emerges. Respect for others and possible mutual understanding are thus not only associated with the acquisition of an attitude, value, or ability: it seems also to be about students' personal development as human beings. Perhaps this effort to promote student subjectification can be seen from the perspective that an overly one-sided perception of reality risks implying that you as a human being live your life in a poorer, less nuanced, and more self-limiting way.

K2: I feel sorry for those who go through their lives [like that], and I know some adults who are very black and white, and I feel sorry for those who can't see any other point of view than their own. It's a bit like Ann was [saying before] that there's a lot in the world that must be completely incomprehensible to them in that they can't see things from any other perspective.

The teacher quoted above talks about the deprivation people experience by relating to society from a black and white perspective that lacks nuance. When the teacher quoted below draws parallels to the notion of electoral fraud in the US presidential election, it is also with reference to the risks associated with an overly one-sided way of looking at life.

D2: Yes, but it's hard not to draw parallels to what's going on in the United States right now, (the suggestion is that) the majority of Republicans think there's been an election fraud. ... yes, but it's difficult to somehow take it in... but despite overwhelming evidence I think then, although I may be one-sided in my way of thinking, because there wasn't an election fraud and the election was correct and ... and school has in some way a role in prevention, by saying that yes of course you can be completely convinced that Trump is a better president, but that does not mean that there must have been an election fraud if he is not elected.

According to the teachers here, anyone who clings to a one-sided perception of reality is assumed to jeopardise the possibility of exchange with and understanding of others. They feel that this lack of understanding can, in a worst-case scenario, lead to personal dissatisfaction and frustration.

G2: I also think for -, and for the individual it must be, it would be quite frustrating to not be able to understand other people's perspectives because then you also have no idea at all why, for example, people vote for Joe Biden instead of Donald Trump if they can't understand another person's starting point in this life. So, to be able to understand development in society, you have to be able to see it from the perspective of different groups, because otherwise it becomes quite incomprehensible.

As these quotes demonstrate, the teachers express an understanding that seems to be characterised by a kind of substantive openness in addition to advocating multi-perspectivism, far-sightedness, and tolerance. A recurring ambition of the teachers seems to be one that seeks to give students a wider range of possible opinions and actions to choose from, yet the choice and the judgement-forming process of the individual student seems to be left more open. The direction of this change, however, seems to be largely left to the students themselves. As the teachers here seem to suggest, as long as students can consider several alternatives, as long as they can see that the matter can be viewed from several perspectives, as the newest members of society they have the right to an opinion, to think for themselves, and to do what they feel is best

Discussion

The primary aim with this article has been to increase the understanding of how history and social studies teachers in vocational preparation programmes at upper-secondary schools in Sweden relate to the task of preparing students for their future lives as citizens. This aim, with its focus on the professional teacher's perspective, already distinguishes this article from most existing research on the civic and citizenship function of education, vocational preparation programmes, and the didactics of history and social studies. Former studies have instead emphasised the predetermined, normative and socialising nature of citizenship education. Much of this previous research (e.g. Leeman and Volman, 2021; Wildemeersch et al., 2020) seems to be based on predetermined definitions of the purpose and goals of education – and with such critical perspectives in place, these earlier studies have created an interpretation that suggests VET practices contribute to the reproduction of specific values and a type of knowledge that leaves less space for students to act as independent subjects (Ledman, 2015; Nylund et al., 2020; Odenstad, 2010). Educational sociology and other social criticism have paid particular attention to how different types of regulatory discourses can both shape and limit the behaviours and attitudes of those involved in the construction and maintenance of professional discourses (Ledman et al., 2018; Nylund et al., 2017). Rönnlund et al. (2019), for example, noted how the knowledge required in Swedish VET programmes, compared with other upper-secondary school programmes, provides students with fewer opportunities to develop skills such as the ability to use theoretical concepts and models or to exercise

critical-thinking. In other words, students in VET programmes seem to be trained by the teachers to “do” and to “adapt”, whereas students in academic preparatory programmes are taught by the teachers to “think” and “imagine opportunities” (Nylund et al., 2017; cf. also Ledman, 2015; Odenstad, 2010).

The results of this article seem to contribute in part to problematising such an interpretation. In the more than five hours of interview conversations that we conducted with five teachers of history and social studies, what can best be described as a clear will to prepare VET students for a future as broadminded and tolerant citizens was clearly evident. This finding may have been influenced by our method, which gave the teachers the opportunity to speak in a collective setting about their own citizenship practice with their students. Nevertheless, when the teachers describe their pedagogical endeavours within the vocational preparation programme, their descriptions of the good citizen primarily convey that, in a nuanced way, as being someone who looks at life and the world from more than one perspective. They repeatedly emphasise the importance of VET students being able to realise and accept that there are many perceptions of the world. To have students change perspective, the school thus needs to contribute *alternative*, and distinct, ways of thinking about society at large. The attitudes of the teachers in this study, therefore, consistently articulate the purpose of social studies and history teaching in terms of seeking to offer additional and alternative ways of looking at oneself, at others, and at society.

Other research, including that we ourselves have conducted, describes how teachers in various ways seek to work with these more qualifying and, in some respects, socialising ambitions (cf. Berg and Persson, 2020; Persson and Berg, 2021; Tur Porres, 2018). However, when teachers express a desire to broaden their VET students’ understanding of what is, this suggests they have the desire to enable them to change both themselves and the society in which they are set to live (cf. Aldenmyr et al., 2012).

It may be that through this desire, the teachers in some sense deal with the classic didactic dilemma presented in the introduction to this text. Biesta (2017b) is just one researcher who points out how the concept of emancipation has, paradoxically, often neglected the situation and needs of the enslaved. Biesta describes “the clear tension between the ambition to liberate and the claim that this requires someone telling you what is really going on in your head”. While Biesta warns of a situation where the one who educates allows himself to be “fooled by the idea that the freedom to learn and, more specifically, the freedom of interpretation and significance, is the way in which we inscribe ourselves in the political project of equality” (Biesta, 2017b), the teachers interviewed here seem to advocate a way of looking at their teaching that neither transfers the teaching responsibility to the student nor unilaterally locks its objectives in a predetermined goal around a particular set of opinions or content.

The challenge of having VET students look at issues in different ways is associated instead with imagination and a self-critical practice that operates at some distance from their own perceptions. Hence the individual VET student is offered more choice and greater opportunity to engage in the judgement-forming process than previous research has shown. From the data used in this article, an understanding of the subject emerges that, in addition to the advocacy of multi-perspectivism, broadmindedness, and tolerance, seems to be characterised by a kind of substantive openness. Almost regardless of student’s attitudes, teachers seem to see it as their obligation to point to alternative ways of looking at a situation. The starting point seems to be about giving VET students a wider range of possible opinions and actions to choose from, yet the choice – a result, then, of the student’s own judgment-forming process – seems to be left largely up to them. Bringing students to this decision point is not a matter of predetermined qualification; instead, it is an emancipatory change process that the students drive primarily themselves.

Implications

In the introduction, it is claimed that teachers always have to deal with the tension between meeting the expected needs of contemporary society and seeking to contribute to the opportunities young people have to change it. As shown in this article, the teachers' stories about how they seek to handle this dilemma describe, to a much lesser extent than expected, an either/or position. In their attempt to describe how they have sought over the years to find ways to deal with the age-old balance between teaching as socialisation or subjectification, they seem rather to have adopted a position that combines both to a much greater extent than previously thought. From this perspective the question of the purpose of school in general, and of the function of history and social studies in particular, on the part of the teacher becomes a matter of judgement and professional involvement in unique didactic situations.

This finding should be significant in how we look at both citizenship education and vocational preparation programmes. The conversations with the teachers we interviewed for this article demonstrate that there is something to be gained by leaving the more limited didactic manoeuvrability to those working in the field. In this study, we chose not to review the teachers' practices from a pre-determined citizenship ideal; instead, we let them describe in their own words their pedagogical endeavours. In such a way, they showed us how history and social studies open up an opportunity to challenge students' understanding of both the present and the past. If teaching is to be truly emancipatory, it is not enough to simply widen students' perceptions of what is possible. What the teachers say shows us that citizenship education in VET – as with other school subjects – needs to be seen as a much more open-ended process. If school really is intended to provide space for the younger generation to change the world, it should then avoid giving expression to predetermined ideas about which sorts of citizenship knowledge, abilities and attitudes its education is expected to lead to.

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