

**How initial vocational education and training (IVET) teachers in Sweden perceive their prospects of being able to prepare upper secondary school pupils for a future occupation**

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## **Abstract**

Vocational teachers in Swedish upper secondary schools are a heterogeneous category of teachers, connected to different types of trade. These teachers represent a broad set of trade skills varying in content and character. In their teacher role, they continue to wear the clothes, speak the language, share the culture and remain mentally in their former professions. Still, it is central that they keep up this contact to be able to school the pupils into the environment of the trade in question, but also to help them to understand what skills a profession demands. However, the individual teacher also has to distance himself from the negative elements in the culture of the profession: patterns and habits that, for various reasons, have to be broken or changed. This paper draws attention to the ways in which a group of vocational teachers, who were participants in a project that aimed to train unauthorized vocational teachers, expressed their ambitions to prepare the pupils for a future professional career. When collecting information, we used the degree dissertations they produced and discussed in seminars, and informal dialogues.

The result shows that it is important that the instruction location resembles a real working site as far as possible. These places are more or less realistic copies of a garage, a restaurant kitchen, a hairdressing salon, and so on, in order to give the pupils a realistic setting for instruction. However, the fact that these simulated workplaces lack the necessary support functions that exist in a company creates problems, problems which make a lot of extra work for the teachers. Vocational teachers also have to instruct the pupil in the experienced practitioner's professional skills and working situation, but the pupil herself/himself must learn the job by doing it in practice. Some vocational upper secondary programs lack relevant course literature and the businesses give little support. This also makes extra work for the teachers. Moreover, the distance between the vocational programs and the trainee jobs was experienced as being difficult to overcome. One reason seems to be differences between businesses and differing preconditions between small and big companies' abilities to take care of these pupils. The upper secondary school vocational programs also play a role in cementing existing gender roles, as well as perpetuating class-related patterns on the labour market.

## **Introduction**

The demand for skilled workmen is continually growing as working life becomes more and more complex. This results in a high demand for vocationally trained individuals and gives IVET an important role. It is well known that jobseekers with no formal education are often rejected (see, for example, Bolinder, 2006, Behrenz & Delander; 1996; Ekström, 2001). Stenberg (2005) claims that vocational courses are a more efficient preparation for getting a job compared to theoretical courses.

This paper explores how initial vocational education and training (IVET) teachers in Sweden describe how they perceive their teacher role in relation to organisational and pedagogical presuppositions and dilemmas they have to face in their everyday work. We began to take an interest in these questions when we participated in a project aimed at training uncertificated IVET teachers.<sup>1</sup> The starting-point is the fact that the Swedish curriculum (Lpf 94), implemented in the mid-1990s, prescribed that IVET pupils, as well as being educated and socialised, should not only be prepared for an occupation, but also for university studies. "Unlike many countries, Swedish upper secondary education integrates vocationally-oriented programmes with those geared to preparation for higher education" (Internet 1). The IVET programmes, "in contrast to the university preparing programs include working-place located teaching" (Lemar,

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<sup>1</sup> The SÄL-project, special teacher education, is a government investment in pedagogical training for uncertificated IVET teachers. The main reason is that there is a shortage of qualified IVET teachers in Sweden. The project started in 2005 and is due to end in 2009. Some of the participants have worked a long time as uncertificated IVET teachers, while others are relatively new in the occupation. When participating in the project they were working 50 – 100 percent as teachers. It was a distance-learning project with seminars on the Internet (Marratech) and some physical meetings at the university.

2005:1)<sup>2</sup>. The strong stress on theoretical subjects that characterises the Swedish IVET and vocational education and training – teacher training (VTE-TT), taking place in universities, is also rather unique. Nevertheless, there is a shortage of fully qualified IVET teachers. The chairperson of the Swedish Teachers' Union claims that the main reasons are low salaries and poor study grants. She says that, for example, a welder that becomes an IVET teacher may lose 1000 Euro a month (Internet 2).

The demands on the IVET teachers are many and come from various directions, with partly conflicting demands and expectations. For example, the interplay between the fourteen IVET programmes and working life is strongly stressed. To be an IVET teacher involves also continuously following the changes and developments that take place in a trade and in companies, for example, following the introduction of new techniques. However, teachers do not have enough contact with the trades (Lemar, 2005), neither do they have access to the latest equipment and techniques and they also sometimes lack relevant school supplies. Many of them perceive they are not able to keep up with all the tasks they are supposed to perform.

### **A field still lacking research**

Despite the existence of a lot of research results on schools and teaching, research on the VET/IVET is a relatively unexplored field (Greinert, 2004). Studies that describe and analyse the Swedish IVET (Lemar, Lundgren, von Schantz Lundgren, 2008) seem, for example, to be rare. However, in connection with the Swedish vocational education tradition Olofsson (2005) has, for example, discussed what happens when the IVET pupils are to be educated both for an occupation and for university studies and he also claims that there are no notions of vocational knowledge expressed in the syllabuses. Nilsen and Kvale (2000) have made a theoretical criticism of overly school-centred teaching methods.

### **Data collection**

This paper takes its point of departure in a case study, in which we as responsible for, and teachers in, two of three courses within a project, aimed at training uncertificated vocational teachers.<sup>3</sup> We continuously discussed and reflected on what the participants told us about their working conditions and we made small notes to help us to remember specific situations. We also examined degree theses<sup>4</sup> that the participants produced during a two-year-period, from the autumn of 2007 to the summer of 2008.

As this is a case study built on a limited number of IVET teachers, we do not claim that the results are applicable to IVET teachers in general. On the other hand, these teachers came from different places, schools and vocational programmes in central Sweden and they described a rather similar working situation. Accordingly, we would say that we have identified some important problems that IVET teachers have to handle regarding organisational and pedagogical challenges.

In figure 1 (see below) we describe a model in order to structure and place the upper secondary vocational programme in a wider context, which we deem necessary to make it possible to interpret IVET teachers' work and actions.

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<sup>2</sup> Note. Our translation.

<sup>3</sup> Together there were four groups with between about 25 and 50 participants in each group.

<sup>4</sup> Altogether there were about 30 degree theses.

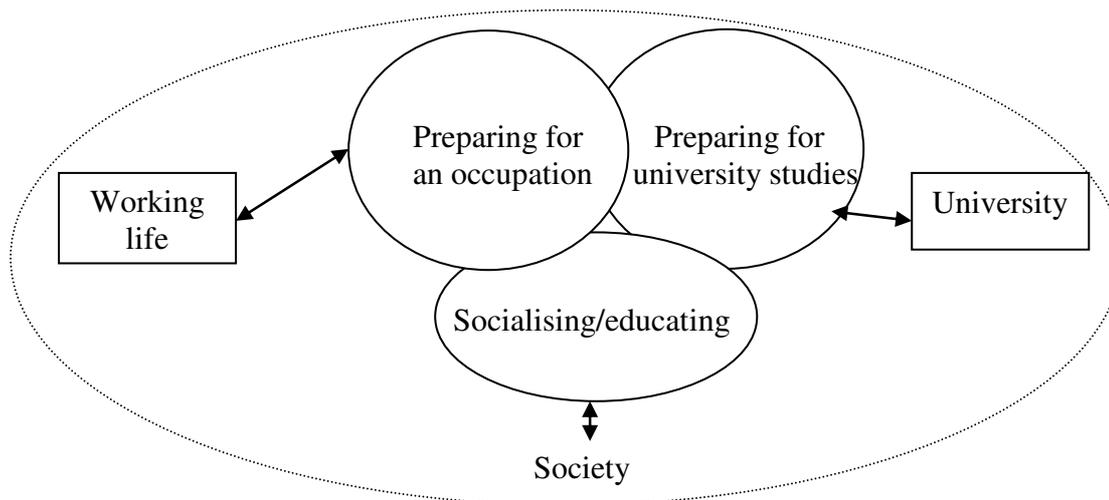


Figure 1. The IVET and its pedagogical practice.

### **Being an IVET teacher**

The result of the study is presented thematically. We found, among other things, that, mentally, IVET teachers find themselves in two different occupations. Furthermore, they had problems with maintaining close connections with the trades and individual companies, but also with co-operating with the specialist teachers. We also noted that a great part of the IVET teachers' work is targeted towards creating a functioning pedagogical environment, but that often relevant and updated educational material is lacking.

### **The IVET teacher – being somewhere between two occupations**

Being an IVET teacher is having two occupations in one: both as teacher and as skilled worker. Many of the teachers in this study indicated that they found it difficult to maintain adequate contact with their former occupation as time went by. Accordingly, they felt they gradually lost their expert competence. It is, of course, important for IVET teachers to keep their former professional identity in order to be able to help their pupils to adapt to the role of skilled worker, but also to help them to understand what kind of competence this occupation requires. It is in this process that the IVET teacher is supposed to support the pupil's effort to create an occupational identity. For the IVET teacher, it is also a question of distancing students from negative elements or habits that have to be broken or changed. It could, for example, be how to act in order to promote equal opportunities and to prevent discrimination taking place at the workplace. Today, the labour market is structured in such a way that gender discrimination does take place. Working conditions for men and women differ in many respects. They mainly work in different trades and have different jobs; this creates pay differentials, different conditions of employment as well as different status and power (Gonäs (ed.) 2005, SOU 2004:43). We also know that different types of discrimination take place in working life. Höglund (2007) says the research results support the claim that this very likely also exists in Swedish working life.

### **IVET and its co-operation with specialist teachers**

Different categories of teachers in upper secondary schools have traditionally worked separated from each other, something that also cause tensions and power struggles (Carlsson 2001; von Schantz Lundgren, 2008). Despite the specialist teachers' higher

status they often hesitate to co-operate with the IVET teachers. They are not used to meeting pupils who lack motivation for theoretical subjects, which is a rather common occurrence on the IVET programmes. The content of a subject changes when it is related to an occupation. For example, an IVET teacher tells us that an English teacher refused to teach on the Hotel and Restaurant Programme, as he did not consider himself to be a specialist in “Restaurant English”. The different categories of teachers also found it hard to find common themes that they could use as a basis for co-operation. Nevertheless, IVET and specialist teachers work with the same pupils, but with different subjects and often in different buildings (see, for example, Arnman & Torper, 1989; von Schantz Lundgren, 2008) and with different subjects. Hargreaves (1998) names this as “egg box structure”. This situation is only changing slowly. However, in the curriculum (Lpf 94) it states that teachers are obliged to co-operate in order to achieve the goals set up for the study programme. This is something schools have tried to handle with different kinds of working groups, mirrored in teachers’ everyday work.

Every teacher that was interviewed reports that they are members of various working groups in their school. They mention working environment committees, subject groups, web-group and equal opportunity groups. Every group has regular meetings, where they are given tasks that have to be solved by their members.<sup>5</sup> (Degree thesis, SÄL)

What the teachers co-operate about often involves tasks that fall outside their subject teaching, but are still necessary to make it possible to organise the schoolwork in a proper way. Somewhat surprisingly, it seems hard to achieve functioning co-operation regarding the teaching of the different subjects. One of the most important motives for co-operation, as we perceive it, is that it makes it possible to integrate theoretical and vocational subjects in order to assimilate the vocational subjects in a proper way. This could also be a way to raise the quality of the IVET.

### **IVET and its co-operation with trades**

In many trades, there is fast change and development, “something that makes it necessary for the teacher to be alert to what is going on as the pupils will soon be going to use the techniques/technology at their future workplaces”<sup>6</sup> (Degree theses, SÄL). The expectations of what these pupils will be able to produce as skilled workers are in many cases high. “The pupils perceived that the employers thought they were able to bring new impulses directly from their training”<sup>7</sup> (Degree thesis, SÄL). However, this is not entirely problem-free. “The training of the pupils does not always correspond to the vocational expectations they meet as employees in the business world”<sup>8</sup> (Degree thesis, SÄL). The co-operation taking place between the business world and the vocational programmes in the IVET also involves a lot of other problems. Lemar (2006) says, for example, that the distances between the IVET programmes and the trainee posts have increased in a way that was not intended and the cleft has grown after the new curriculum was implemented. One reason might be that schools have missed out in their information. Another is that there is not enough time to create personal relations, something we think is necessary in order to create

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<sup>5</sup> Note: Our translation.

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functioning co-operation. However, there are big differences between different trades and between small and large enterprises.

Industry, and especially the big companies, advise an enlargement of theoretical knowledge. Specialisation and supplementary training is a matter for the company. However, small and medium-sized enterprises have little or no possibilities to offer training. These enterprises need manpower that goes into the production process instantly.<sup>9</sup> (Carlsson, 2001:39)

Accordingly, the IVET teachers perceive their contact with the business world as a difficult task. One example:

It is important that the painting and decorating trade gets more knowledge about the IVET programme and that they understand how today's school works. The conservative thinking in the trade results in pupils in trainee posts being supposed to know things that are required of a skilled painter, to work on their own and to manage without a mentor.<sup>10</sup> (Degree thesis, SÄL)

The efforts to establish co-operation between the IVET programmes and the business world have, so far, given poor results. A survey among 100 IVET teachers and nine headmasters showed that hardly any systematic co-operation existed (Lemar, 2006).

The answers are heterogenous, reflecting different traditions. Almost no systematic work to promote closer collaboration with labour market in the investigated programs is indicated, lack of time being a common alleged reason. The reform ambition to give these a real influence has merely caused a few ripples on the surface. However school actors wish to create a deeper collaboration with the branches. (Lemar, 2006, abstract)

Furthermore, the different trades were not involved on a regular basis in the design of the training that takes place in the field (Lemar 2005 & 2006).

### **Creating a pedagogical environment**

IVET teachers teach in a school environment that, as far as possible, resembles a workplace. Their task is to build a, more or less, true-to-life copy of a garage, a restaurant kitchen, a hairdressing salon and so on as a way to simulate a real working place (Höghielm, 2001).

School garages are often well equipped. Besides equipment such as lifting devices and tools, there are technological systems related to vehicles, such as teaching models, electronic devices, different engines and power transmission systems, to mention some examples. Everything demands maintenance, preventing repairs and repairs; this is what the vehicle teachers take care of.<sup>11</sup> (Degree thesis, SÄL)

In these garages, "real customers" are taken care of and the IVET teachers are in a situation close to their former occupation, with the difference that they are responsible for ensuring that the IVET pupils do a decent job of work for the customers.

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<sup>9</sup> Note: Our translation.

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Nowadays, the pupils are supposed to work close to reality: they are intended to see the whole by working with cars. Accordingly, the school is dependent on a steady stream of cars with repair and service needs. The solution was customer cars, cars owned by private persons. The customer cars brought about a new teacher role, booking, spares parts supplies, supervisory control, billing and billing control. <sup>12</sup> (Degree thesis, SÄL)

It is time-consuming to build up and maintain these teaching environments and the responsibility often falls on the IVET teachers. When the State was responsible, there were national norms for supplies of equipment. When this responsibility was handed over to the local authorities in the early 1990s, it became a question of what financial resources were available in each individual municipality. Accordingly, growing differences between different schools emerged. Another problem is that the simulated workplaces in school do not have the organisation that exists in a company to take care of these supporting functions.

Working with costumers' cars takes a lot of time. There is no logistic system corresponding to a car garage. The car garage has functions such as booking, reception, spare parts service, warehouse, checkout etc. All of this is supposed to be taken care of by the vehicle teachers. <sup>13</sup> (Degree thesis, SÄL)

To achieve good study results, the pupils must have access to equipment and the opportunity to work in small groups. Nevertheless, the solution is to organise the teaching in big groups, anyway, and the pupils have to share the equipment that exists. This also influences the study results. Another way to try to solve this problem is to locate the teaching in companies, which take over more and more of the practical parts of the workplace teaching, and so-called trainee posts are being created as from July 2008 (Internet 3).

### **Shortage of relevant course literature**

In some of the IVET programmes, the shortage of relevant and up-to-date course literature is an important question. We give an example:

As most of the sources are the car companies' publications, these are already in print. However, we consider that the car trade should take a greater responsibility and inform the IVET better about their publications. /.../ The car companies ought to have a common policy about their publications that allowed their material to be copied and be used in the IVET. <sup>14</sup> (Degree thesis, SÄL)

Another problem is that some trades do not give the IVET support that could influence the content and working forms. The task of producing teaching materials falls on the individual IVET teacher, which is difficult and time-consuming. Accordingly, teachers have to prioritise their tasks. However, do they have the possibility to say "No" to every new task? The teaching profession is characterised by always unfinished work (Hargreaves, 1998). There are more tasks that should be done and with more stringency. New tasks come up and old ones do not disappear. The demands on teachers come from many different sources and the demands are often difficult to

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<sup>12</sup> Note: our translation.

<sup>13</sup> Note: our translation.

<sup>14</sup> Note: our translation.

resist, as they are perceived as legitimate. Together this makes the teacher's work more and more intensified (Hargreaves, 1998).

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The picture we present tallies, in many aspects, with those already existing. Teaching is a never-ending work (Hargreaves, 1998). Teachers do not co-operate enough, either inside or outside school (Lortie, 1975). Contacts with the trades and the companies are in many cases undeveloped, above all because everyone is occupied with their core tasks. Accordingly, the individual teachers work isolated from each other, despite the existing co-operation groups that already exist. The picture that appears shows teaching taking place in a complex context (Fullan, 1999, von Schantz Lundgren, 2008) and with activities difficult to organise, with many individuals involved. This corresponds well with the general existing mental picture of the teacher profession. However, solving these problems is not only a question of inadequate financial resources, but also how headmasters and teachers organise the teaching and the possibility to get adequate vocational education and training – teacher training (VTE-TT).

What are the practical consequences of the problems that the IVET has to face? We claim that the teachers must be well trained to manage the complex and difficult situation they are in. The current IVTE has a relatively large proportion of uncertificated vocational teachers and they must be trained in order to be fully qualified. For example, the SÅL-project may be seen as an important element and something that needs to be continued. We also claim that the existing VTE-TT has to be reformed in order to correspond to the demands on IVET teachers. There is also a need to develop flexible teaching methods for heterogeneous groups of pupils, with varying prerequisites for upper secondary school studies. However, the Swedish upper secondary school is to be reorganised shortly (Dir. 2007:8) and so far we can only guess the consequences.

## **Conclusions**

Firstly, the IVET teachers have to handle a lot of limitations, for example, lack of time, equipment, relevant teaching materials and poor contacts with the trades. Accordingly, the pupils do not always get the intended qualifications they need to be a skilled worker. Secondly, there is a need to strengthen the VET-TT and the financial prerequisite when you study to be a IVET teacher. As a skilled worker, with a family and a good salary, you could not survive on poor study allowances, as well as low salaries. This is also, we claim, the main reason why there is a shortage of VET teachers in Sweden today. Thirdly, the IVET study programmes need an organisation that is flexible enough to meet a continuously changing society. Finally, many basic prerequisites are lacking today and this makes it impossible for the IVET study programmes to achieve the aims in existing policy documents. We still know too little about the IVET study programmes and the problems IVET teachers have to face. It seems high time to initiate research that could help us to answer these questions.

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