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Personal Goals of Vocational Teachers in Sweden and Finland and Their View of Their Country-Specific VET System

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Abstract

Both the Swedish and Finnish VET systems are school-based systems grounded on an educational system that formulates an integrative claim. No one should be disadvantaged because of a social background and an academic affiliation is guaranteed following a vocational school decision. In the current study from 2019, the personal goals and motivations of VET teachers to become teachers in both countries are considered and compared. In addition, Finnish and Swedish teachers were asked about the strengths and weaknesses of their VET systems and the objectives of vocational education. The cultural backgrounds of the countries that influence the education system as well as the economic structure and the history are described and considered in the analyses. It seems finally that the Finns are more critical with their VET system, while the Swedes are more satisfied overall, or at least they give fewer answers to the urgent need to improve key aspects of their VET system. In a further discussion, the aspects of the personal status and mentality, the cultural-historical roots and the educational policy discourses will be considered.

Keywords

vocational teacher; Finland; Sweden; VET System, strengths, weaknesses

1 Introduction and Background

Vocational education in Finland and Sweden has many similarities, likewise the cultural values of a Nordic welfare state action, the school-based system and VET teachers with large experiences in working life. A common political aim is that no one should be disadvantaged on the basis of neither social/economical background nor geographical location. This is an important part of the welfare state education policy of the Nordic countries, also to the VET system (Helms Jørgensen et al., 2018). Work based learning and apprenticeship are dominant themes in the educational discourse in both countries (Kaiser & Lindberg, 2019). One strategy to realize a strong linkage to the (real) work life in Finland and Sweden is to hire experienced workers as



VET teachers for the VET schools by offering them a short-term study besides working (Isacsson et al., 2018). The Finnish VET system has its roots in the 19th and 20th century in strong branch specific pathways into the teacher profession working at branch specific VET schools from which the universities of applied sciences then also developed (Heikinen, 2003) In Sweden we can reconstruct similar traditions especially in the forest industry (Karlsson et al., 2016)

As a theoretical background, the critical-emancipative vocational education and training theory (Kaiser, 2016; 2019) is used in the study. From this perspective, the reflection of the VET teachers on their own career is of interest and their attitude to the current regime of their vocational training system. Information for the survey was obtained from existing descriptions of the educational pathways of vocational school teachers (Nissilä, 2006; Isacsson et al., 2018; Virolainen & Stenström, 2014) and from discussions with VET school principals and political stakeholders conducted in the two countries.

The research interest is centered on the personal motives of VET teachers and their view on their own VET system. Where do they see the strengths and the weaknesses; and what should be improved (in the short term)? The comparison of the two countries and their VET systems can also provide interesting conclusions for other European countries and their VET systems. Overall, the two Scandinavian countries are often mentioned positively for their inclusive and effective education systems.

Between 2012 and 2016, Finland undertook a comprehensive curricular reform to improve basic education's quality and equity. Four values underlie the new curricula: uniqueness of each student and right to a good education; humanity, equality, democracy and general knowledge and ability; cultural diversity as richness; and necessity of a sustainable way of living. (UNESCO, 2020, p. 117)

2 VET in Sweden and Finland

The Nordic states invest more money in their educational system (in general) than other countries in continental Europe do. The specific aims of vocational education are individual self-steering, success at the labour market, competence for further development (learning), inclusion and civil engagement. VET in Sweden and Finland show similar developments in recent years, but also some differences. In Sweden, VET is integrated in a comprehensive upper-secondary education, which includes almost all adults between 16 and 19 years old. A reform in the early 1990s meant that vocational educational programs were stronger integrated with-in a decentralized, competitive and goal-oriented organization. Finally, vocational and academic programs in the upper secondary school called gymnasium should give eligibility to higher education and education should be flexible and prepare for broad sections of the labour market. In Finland, also most of the VET programs offered in upper secondary schools. Contrary to Sweden, they are mostly located in separated school buildings with branch specific programs (Kaiser & Lindberg, 2019). The participation in the VET programs is even higher (40%) than in Sweden (20%) (Stenström & Virolainen, 2017). The idea of the educational reform of the 1990s in Finland offered students more freedom in choosing courses and set up a stronger connection between VET programs and higher education with a parallel establishing of universities of applied sciences. Finally, to get a stronger relation to the labor market at the beginning of the 2000s, the on-the-job-learning periods in initial school-based VET were derived from the curriculum, so that VET teachers and workplace instructors had to work closer together. A flexible apprenticeship model with competence-based assessments had a long tradition for young adults to offer them further career choices and to reach the demands of companies. Since the new reform of 2018, more and more individualized training plans, self-assessment and work-based as well as self-learning phases are offered. Students can try education in an apprenticeship model and

return in the school-based VET as well as the possibility to change from school-based VET into paid work without finishing the qualification (Kaiser & Lindberg, 2019).

To become a VET teacher, there are major differences in the educational/academic pathways. In Finland, a minimum Bachelor degree in the teaching subject is needed to enter the VET teacher study programme, while in Sweden the pathway is more split: To enter the study programme only some years of experience in work after finishing a VET programme at school is obligatory followed by two years of studying at a university with 90 ECTS is the situation in Sweden. While one year of studying at a University of Applied Sciences with 60 ECTS is the situation in Finland. In both countries, the degree of the VET teachers programme at the universities is neither a bachelor nor a master, it is only a certification. Overall, in Finland it is a more personalised and competence-oriented approach in strong linkage to the work at schools during the study programme. The subsequent tasks in schools after finishing the programme are similar in both Scandinavian countries because of the school-based, practical oriented approach of teaching in the VET schools. Teacher-teamwork and networks to the regional economic life to get companies for the work-based learning are also central in their concept (Kaiser & Lindberg, 2019).

3 Methods

The survey was conducted in connection with a research stay of the first author (F.K.) in Finland and Sweden. Discussions with vocational school teachers, school administrators and political decision-makers resulted in questions that were transferred to an online survey in both countries, which was conducted at the beginning of 2019.

The analysis of the data is based on qualitative content analysis and identifies types of vocational school teachers and their approaches as well as their motivations. 41 of the 65 participants were working as a teacher in Finland and 24 in Sweden (Average age: 48; 61% female; the two biggest VET-fields are “Health and care (welfare)” (16%) and “Industrial technology” (15%). Based on an initial evaluation by Kaiser and Lindberg (2019), further aspects were focused here, such as the personal goals for the own career decision to become a VET teacher were collected with open questions (Köpsén, 2014). In a second step of the analyses, the openly collected answers were coded and summarized. Finally, the categories between the two groups of teachers were compared. Using the same methodological approach, we assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the country-specific VET system. Central questions of the research interest are the following:

- (1) Why did you choose to become a vocational teacher? What had been your personal goals?
- (2) What are the 1-3 most important fields to be improved in the training of vocational teachers?
- (3) What are the strengths of the current VET system in your country? (4) What are the weaknesses of the current VET system in your country? (5) What do you think should be changed?

The respondents' text answers were first screened and then classified in self-developed categories in a multi-stage (inductive) process. The categories developed on the material facilitate further evaluation steps, e.g. for sample comparisons. First, the reader is introduced to the individual categories of the questions here, each with an example sentence (partly shortened, linguistically slightly adapted and orthography corrected).

The generated answers to the question(s) “*Why did you choose to become a vocational teacher? What had been your personal goals?*” were assigned to eight categories: (1) “Not planned or by coincidence” (Sample sentence: “*The birth ward in my hometown was shut down, so I had to get another job.*”), (2) “Interest and wish to teach people” (“*My goals was to teach the vocational subjects I have gotten very skilled at from working many years.*”), (3) “Working conditions and job profile as a teacher” (“*work in daytime, good salary and no physical work like in industry*”), (4) “Wish to fulfil students aspirations and support of learning processes” (“*Wanted to help young people, be part of their learning processes*”), (5) “Recommendation

or recruited” (*“I was headhunted by the principal at the school”*), (6) “Share passion and knowledge for a profession/subject” (*“Love the work in hospital and would love to teach, use all my prior work experience”*), (7) “Personal development” (*“I wanted to move on and have another view”*) and (8) “Good educated people for the working world” (*“I had a lot of experience and wanted to educate good staff to the restaurants/kitchen industry”*). It turns out that, overall, the most frequent answers fall into categories that include an interest or passion for teaching and knowledge transfer. In addition, answers that suggest a randomness (of the change of profession) or dissatisfaction with the previous job are also included.

From the answers to the question *“What are the 1-3 most important fields to be improved in the training of vocational teachers?”* we made also eight categories: (1) “More practical and/or teaching experience” (*“Increase of practical experiences”*), (2) “Ability to transform vocational knowledge to teaching content and reverse” (*“Ability to transform vocational knowledge to teaching content”*), (3) “Quality, methods, content of teaching” (*“Skills to assess and evaluate student's learning processes”*), (4) “Continuing teacher training and innovation” (*“Remember that the teachers own skills in the content and the development in vocational skills have to continue also when you start being a teacher. Field work out in the region and staying up to date with what's happening on 'real workplaces'.”*), (5) “Better communication and teamwork with colleagues and companies” (*“communication skills to cooperate with colleagues”*), (6) “Ability to emphasize and to focus on pupils” (*“improve helping students with learning disabilities and the ability to understand students”*), (7) “Knowledge and/or expertise” (*“More practical/technical knowledge”*) and (8) “Other” (*“Grading, school system”*). The distribution of answers painted a relatively clear picture. The field considered to be most important covers the issues of quality, methodology and content of teaching. In addition, but much less frequently, practical experience, the transfer of vocational knowledge, innovations and the student focus are mentioned.

Out of the question *“What are the strengths of the current VET system in your country?”* we develop six categories from the answers, (1) “Flexible and well-structured education- and learning systems” (*“The institutes that run this education are well organized and ambitious, flexible high level education system”*), (2) “Appreciation and working conditions for teachers” (*“high salary of teacher, appreciation for teachers”*), (3) “Good study conditions, study content and accessibility” (*“Possible to study beside work, you can study when you are older”*), (4) “Cooperation with regional companies” (*“good co-up with businesses in the region”*), (5) “High educated teachers” (*“You must have Vocational expertise and pedagogical learning if you want to teach”*) and (6) “Responding to students” (*“Every student receives targeted support”*). In addition to the well-structured education system, the study conditions and highly qualified teachers are seen as particular strengths.

To the question *“What are the weaknesses of the current VET system in your country?”* we invented also six categories: (1) “Not enough attention and time for the students” (*“Learning disabilities were ignored”*), (2) “Education or further education of teachers” (*“Some doesn't have practical experience”*), (3) “Too much autonomy and bureaucracy for teacher” (*“teacher is too autonomy and the system how they are hired”*), (4) “Given standards (content), status vet and educational system” (*“easy to cheat the system”; “digital methods instead of basic skills”* or *“the financial system is not supporting”*) and (5) “Time and resources in schools and study” (*“Not enough basic skills, no money, no classrooms”*). Common weaknesses of their own VET system are considered to be a lack of attention and time, the current standard and limited resources in school and university.

Moreover, out of the answers to the question *“What do you think should be changed?”* we develop four different categories: (1) “More resources and financial support” (*“Don't save on resources for education”*), (2) “Better working conditions and further education” (*“The businesses are changing very quickly”* or *“Salary system. Best teacher should get best salary.”*),

(3) “Laws, structure or changes to education system” (“*School system should organized again to near old system*”) and (4) “Changes to curriculum/content and transfer of values” (“*perhaps the plan of the program, the subjects should be better combined*”). Particular need for change and development is seen for the current working conditions and in changes to the curriculum.

The results for these five questions are subsequently processed and compared or broken down between the countries Finland and Sweden. The open collected answers were partly assigned to several categories. If they covered different aspects, the answers of some respondents were assigned to several categories (double answers are possible).

4 Results

The question “*What are the most important characteristics of a good vocational teacher?*” received 76 named answers (49 Finland, 27 Sweden). Most are collected to the categories (2) “Interest and wish to teach people” (10 Finland, 8 Sweden), (1) “Not planned or by coincidence” (14 Finland, 1 Sweden) and (6) “Share passion and knowledge for a profession/subject” (5 Finland, 5 Sweden). Furthermore, category (3) “Working conditions and job profile as a teacher” (6 Finland, 2 Sweden) and (5) “Recommendation or recruited” (1 Finland, 3 Sweden) also showed interesting differences between the countries under investigation. These findings show that teachers in both countries are interested in teaching and feel a calling in their work. At the same time, the results also highlight differences between the two Scandinavian countries: While in Finland, significantly, more teachers have taken up their profession unplanned and by chance and because of working conditions, this is much less relevant in Sweden. Rather, it appears that suitable teachers are recruited in Sweden and recommended to take up the corresponding career. At the same time, the result is also surprising in view of the fact that access to study programmes and employment in Finland is much more difficult than in Sweden, because the demand from applicants is much higher.

Totally 51 named answers (32 Finland, 19 Sweden) were collected by the question “*What are the 1-3 most important fields to be improved in the training of vocational teachers?*” The main answer is to category (3) “Quality, methods, content of teaching” (8 Finland, 9 Sweden). Some difference between the two comparison groups were found in the categories (1) “More practical and/or teaching experience” (5 Finland, 1 Sweden), (2) “Ability to transform vocational knowledge to teaching content and reverse” (4 Finland, 2 Sweden), (4) “Continuing teacher training and innovation” (4 Finland, 2 Sweden) and (6) “Ability to emphasize and to focus on pupils” (5 Finland, 2 Sweden). From this, it can be cautiously concluded that practical experience, the application of vocational knowledge and understanding of the (individual) student are considered important for Finnish teachers. At the same time, it should be noted that overall, there are more Finnish answers, so that in relation to this, teaching methods are considered to be particularly important for Swedish teachers.

Through asking the question “*What are the strengths of the current VET system in your country?*” we received in total 36 named reactions (27 Finland, 9 Sweden). The categories (1) “Flexible and well-structured education- and learning systems” (10 Finland, 0 Sweden), (2) “Appreciation and working conditions for teachers” (2 Finland, 0 Sweden), (3) “Good study conditions, study content and accessibility” (5 Finland, 2 Sweden) and (5) “High educated teachers” (6 Finland, 2 Sweden) are mainly used and answered to by the Finns, while Swedish teachers see the strength in their VET system in category (4) “Cooperation with regional companies” (1 Finland, 3 Sweden).

Also, the answers to the question “*What are the weaknesses of the current VET system in your country?*” (total named responses: 38; 27 Finland, 11 Sweden) are showing differences between to two Scandinavian countries in almost all the categories: (1) “Not enough attention and time for the students” (6 Finland, 3 Sweden), (2) “Education or further education of teachers” (3 Finland, 0 Sweden), (3) “Too much autonomy and bureaucracy for teacher” (1 Finland,

2 Sweden), (4) “Given standards (content), status vet and educational system” (8 Finland, 4 Sweden) and (5) “Time and resources in schools and study” (9 Finland, 2 Sweden). Finnish respondents see the weaknesses in the decline of resources in school and in the study, in too little financial support and in reforms and laws of the government as a bad influence on the educational system. In contrast, Swedish teachers see weaknesses in the fact that there is not enough time for the students and their personal goals, the low status of VET in their country and in the high autonomy of teachers and the bureaucracy that teachers have to cope with. Overall, Finnish teachers are much more critical of their VET system than Swedish teachers are. Finns more and more often (more clearly) name the corresponding weaknesses. However, this could also possibly have its reasons in the current reform in Finland, which means significant financial losses for the schools and whose effects cannot yet be foreseen, which could also mean a decline in the high reputation of vocational education and training.

Finally, the question “*What do you think should be changed?*” was asked and could collected 34 named answers (26 Finland, 8 Sweden). Furthermore, in this question, the Finns were again clearer and (more often) critical in their answers. A closer look to some examples can proof this impression: (1) “More resources and financial support” (6 Finland, 1 Sweden), (2) “Better working conditions and further education” (9 Finland, 2 Sweden), (3) “Laws, structure or changes to education system” (6 Finland, 0 Sweden) and (4) “Changes to curriculum/content and transfer of values” (5 Finland, 5 Sweden). Especially in the first three aspects, Finns more often see an important need for change than their Swedish colleagues do; Finns demand (more often) better financial support, better working conditions and an improved structure for their education system. This finding fit very well to the above-mentioned thesis, that they fear a risky situation for their national and international high ranked integrated system caused by the current reform (Rintala & Nokelainen, 2019).

5 Conclusion and discussion

The fact that actors in a social field of action wish for or even demand better financial support and technical equipment in the area of improvement cannot come as a surprise. On the contrary, as expected, it is especially the Finns saw the greatest need for improvement in more resources and financial support. This is also an effect resulting from the major reform of Finnish vocational education and training in 2018, which expects a high degree of flexibility in the design of educational pathways and the associated funding from schools (MEC, 2017).

Related to the strengths of the respective VET system, the Finish teachers see especially the quality and structure of the education system, like the flexible and good-structured education- and learning systems, the highly educated teachers and in the existence and transfer of practical skills. While the Swedish respondents focus on cooperation with the regional economy. Probably it also reflects the increasing importance of workplace learning in Sweden combined with the hope to get a solution to reduce youth unemployment with that approach.

Finally, the small sample size in the present study should again be pointed out. Participation in the survey was voluntary and based on the subjective assessment of the respondents, so that further research activities are desirable. Because of the small sample it is very difficult to get some hints on the influence of branches and work specific background on the values and attitudes of the teachers, which is very reasonable (Lempert, 2002). Overall, the results show an interesting insight into the teachers' views of their own VET system, which should be taken into account for future theoretical and practical discourse.

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