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VET teachers' interpretations of individualisation and teaching of skills and social order in two Nordic countries

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Abstract

The age at which young people leave education for the labour market has increased in recent decades, and entering upper secondary education has become the norm. As a result, the diversity of the student population has increased, for instance in terms of students' academic merits and achievements at school. Increased diversity seems to affect vocational education and training more than tracks preparing students for higher education, since entry into VET programmes is rarely selective. In this article we analyse a series of interviews with VET teachers regarding VET practices in upper secondary schools in Sweden and Iceland. We examine how policy plays out in practice in VET by looking at how VET teachers navigate the sometimes conflicting educational goals of employability and civic engagement, while simultaneously teaching a highly diverse group of students. In both countries, pedagogic practices are dominated by individualisation with a focus on task-related skills. Those practices are important in VET, but can exclude broader understandings of civil and workplace life, since general knowledge about areas such as ethics, democracy, equality, and environmental issues is difficult to obtain if education gives students few opportunities to interact with others, such as through group work or classroom discussions.

Key words: vocational education and training, vocational teachers, upper secondary education, individualisation, generic knowledge

Introduction

How education should respond to changes in society has long been debated within Western societies (cf. Arnon and Reichel, 2007; Hargreaves, 2000). In the late 20th century, terms such as the knowledge society came to prominence and impacted curricula through emphasis on competencies, and teaching practices, for instance by focusing on student-oriented approaches (Carlgren et al., 2006). Within vocational education and training (VET) the debate is concerned with what counts as

important knowledge and skills (cf. Wheelahan, 2015). Knowledge content taught within VET is often argued to be either too general or too specific (Hodge et al., 2017; Down et al., 2017), and reflects a tension between the dual educational goals of enhancing employability and developing democratic citizens. The general and the specific, as used here, refer to what other researchers have described as the 'word' and the 'world' (Bernstein, 2000; Avis, 2016; Young, 2008). The world refers to everyday practices, specific tasks, skills and knowledge that are not easily transferred from one context to another. The 'word' refers to knowledge which makes it possible to think abstractly beyond the current situation, is transferable from one context to another, and allows for predictions about the future. There is no inherent hierarchical relationship between knowledge of the world and the word, and the two should be considered inseparable. However, such separation and hierarchy are established through social practices (Durkheim, 2001; Bernstein, 2000).

Educational systems are embedded in structures of the societies of which they are parts, and reflect the nature of those societies. It is often argued that the Nordic countries have relatively low social inequality, comprehensive welfare states, and strong public education systems (Hall and Soskice 2001; Wheelahan, 2015). In addition, the Nordic countries are often used as examples of societies that promote social equality and inclusion. For example, throughout the post-war period Swedish policy-makers viewed the relationship between social background, education and the division of labour as a serious problem to be addressed by educational reform. Creating a less stratified educational system was therefore a central objective of Swedish educational policy during the post-war period (see Lappalainen, Nylund & Rosvall, this special issue). The hope was that reducing differentiation between educational pathways and delaying the onset of divergence would, in sociological terms, increase young people's agency and the range of transitions available to students from all social groups. A specific illustration of this was the inclusion of more teaching hours to cover general subjects within VET programmes (Nylund and Rosvall, 2016). In Iceland, the overall national education policy emphasises inclusion at all school levels. Moreover, the Upper Secondary School Act (nr. 92/2008) entitles any individual who has completed compulsory education, has equivalent basic education or has reached the age of 16 to enrol in upper secondary school, ensuring equal access to upper secondary education (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a). In addition, the Icelandic national curriculum emphasises six core pillars of education (health and wellbeing, literacy, sustainability, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity) that should be included at all school levels and in all subjects (Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Schools, 2011).

Education policy in both Sweden and Iceland emphasises social equality and inclusion. However, several previous studies have shown that policy and practice may often diverge (Dovemark, 2011; Beach, 2001; Nylund and Rosvall, 2016). With steady increases in attendance rates, the diversity of successive cohorts of young people entering upper secondary schools group is increasing, raising questions about if, and if so how, teachers adapt their pedagogic practices to meet associated challenges.

Individualisation is often recommended and employed to deal with the increasing diversity of students, especially in implementing policy on inclusive education. Individualisation in education means teachers tailoring instruction towards individual students, ideally monitoring and supporting learning progress as needed (Kuznetsova and Régnier, 2014). The students address tasks at their own speed and the teacher assists them as required. This often involves one-on-one teaching in a class setting, where the group as a whole still has common educational or competency goals.

Individualisation has been a theme in education in the Nordic countries for more than 50 years with varying ideological underpinnings. In the mid-20th century individualisation "was seen as the way to

accomplish differentiation within the unstreamed [comprehensive] school” (Carlgren, Klette, Mýrdal, Schnack, and Simola, 2006, p. 302). More recently, individualisation in teaching practices has been related to neo-liberal education policy and social constructivist learning theories. A comparison of individualised teaching practices in comprehensive education among five Nordic countries has clearly shown the influence of neo-liberal individualisation through the emphasis on individual competition and choices for individuals (in contrast with an emphasis on education for society) (Carlgren, Klette, Mýrdal, Schnack & Simola, 2006). Even though social constructivist learning theories emphasise the collaborative nature of learning and teaching methods based on the theory are usually based on team/group work of various kinds. However Sjöberg (2014) in line with Carlberg et al. (2006) argues that through neoliberal ideals other elements of social constructive learning has been emphasised and transformed to advocate active learning and recognize a need to structure teaching practices around the student, reinforcing the endorsement of individualised teaching practices in the classroom.

Individualisation can have obvious benefits – for example, tailoring instruction to the student and encouraging self-regulation – but the emphasis on individualisation as a pedagogic practice might also have drawbacks in terms of missing opportunities to foster shared and more generic educational goals of social order, for instance through collaboration and critical discussion. In addition, strong individualisation tends to benefit students who can manage individually, but risks marginalising students from non-academic backgrounds with weaker academic self-regulation skills (Beach, 2001; Rosvall, 2013).

Here we consider how policy regarding VET plays out in practice, by examining how VET teachers navigate the dual educational goals of employability *and* civic engagement, while simultaneously teaching a highly diverse group of students. To do this, we address pedagogical practices in VET classes and the rationale that teachers provide for those practices, in Iceland and Sweden. We focus on how teachers discuss the diversity amongst students that they face in the classroom and how they deal with it in practice, especially through individualisation (framing) and what that means for the delivery of knowledge in VET (classification).

VET in Sweden and Iceland

Iceland and Sweden afford an interesting examination of VET teaching practices. This is because they have developed different VET systems, but they share some commonalities as they both draw on the Nordic model, and in both countries (for example) students are sorted into VET and higher education tracks later than in Germany (Beicht and Walden, 2017).

In Sweden, since 2011, three types of upper secondary school pathways have been offered: six programmes preparing students for higher education, 12 VET programmes, and five introductory programmes that are mainly directed toward pupils who are not eligible for a national programme. During the century before reforms in 2011, differences between vocational education and higher education preparatory programmes had gradually been reduced. By 2010 they shared an overarching syllabus and both provided entrance to universities, but the 2011 reforms introduced greater separation between them. The change was intended to address issues of throughput and dropout, and tighten connections to the labour market. These objectives were pursued by reducing the time allotted to general subjects such as social sciences and Swedish in favour of vocational subjects within VET. The number of students choosing a vocational programme decreased drastically immediately after the reforms were implemented and have continued to fall more gradually ever since (Skolverket, 2016; see also Lappalainen, Nylund & Rosvall, this special issue). The reforms of 2011 also introduced a separate curriculum for students with learning disabilities, but students with

neuropsychiatric learning disabilities such as ADHD and Asperger syndrome are not usually included in the group of students covered by this curriculum.

In Iceland, students can take either of two general tracks at upper secondary level. One is an academic higher educational preparatory track (offering students various programmes to choose; e.g. social science, natural sciences, and languages) culminating in a matriculation exam giving students the right to enter universities. The other is a VET track, offering various vocational programmes, some of which lead to a journeyman's exam (in the so-called certified trades, e.g. hairdressing, plumbing, baking). Currently over 100 VET programmes are offered at upper secondary schools in Iceland, generally lasting 3-4 years (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2013). Students on a VET track in upper secondary schools can choose to take extra semesters to complete the matriculation exam, thereby gaining eligibility for university education. Students increasingly take advantage of this opportunity, and on average about 40% of those finishing VET studies also complete the matriculation exam. As inclusiveness is a general element of education policy for upper secondary schools in Iceland, students with learning disabilities should be included in all classes whenever possible (Upper Secondary School Act nr. 92/2008). Most schools provide students with disabilities support, usually based on rights granted by official diagnosis (for example dyslexia or ADHD). The support includes student counsellor services, special study halls, and help with writing, test-taking, etc. Upper secondary schools offering VET programmes often have VET programmes tailored to students with intellectual disabilities or moderate/severe disabilities and special programmes (or policies) aimed at new citizens. These students are therefore often segregated into special VET classes specific to these programmes.

The structure of VET education differs in important ways in Sweden and Iceland. In Sweden, the VET programmes have generally been assimilated into upper secondary schools, although the reform in 2011 pulled away from this structure. In Iceland, VET is mostly organised as a dual system, where a work-place learning period is an independent part of the programme (outside the purview of schools), and VET programmes retain a certain level of separation from the traditional upper secondary school structure (academic tracks).

Levels of VET participation in both countries have suffered due to the low social status associated with many VET qualifications and careers. This drives many students to choose the academic route, which seems to be regarded as more prestigious, despite being more interested in VET (Blöndal et al., 2011). Currently about 31 and 26% of students in upper secondary schools in Iceland and Sweden, respectively, are enrolled in VET programmes; lower in both cases than the OECD average of 46% (OECD, 2016; Prime Minister's Office, 2012; Skolverket, 2016; Statistics Iceland, 2016).

Student diversity in VET upper secondary education

In both countries, a growing proportion of each cohort, currently about 95% of 16-year-olds, enrol in upper secondary school (Skolverket, 2016; Statistics Iceland, 2016). This inevitably leads to increased diversity within the student population in upper secondary education, including VET (van Middelkoop et al., 2017). VET appears to be the option more likely to be suggested for students with low previous academic achievements or qualifications, either directly, or indirectly through selection of more qualified students to pursue higher education preparatory programmes. Indeed, statistics and recent research show that the student population in VET is diverse in terms of achievement, learning disability, and in Iceland also age (Blöndal, 2017; Skolverket, 2016; Statistics Iceland, 2016). This is also illustrated in throughput. In Sweden 67-72% of the VET students who completed their final exam in the years 2014-2017 finished within three years, while corresponding proportions of students in higher preparatory programmes were 74-77% (Skolverket, 2018; see also Helms Jørgensen, Järvinen & Lundahl, this special issue). In Iceland throughput is also lower for VET programmes than for higher

preparatory programmes. Of all the students who started upper secondary education in 2007, about 77% of those attending higher preparatory programmes had graduated six years later (the average programme duration was 4 years), but only 45% of those attending VET programmes (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014a).

In Sweden higher education preparatory programmes tend to have higher entry requirements than VET programmes, which contributes to greater heterogeneity in the latter (Nylund and Rosvall, 2016; Nylund et al., 2017). The pattern is broadly similar in Iceland, as upper secondary schools use grades from compulsory school to determine entry and the most popular, and therefore selective, schools are grammar schools that do not offer any VET (Directorate of Education, 2016; Eiríksdóttir, Ragnarsdóttir, and Jonasson, in press). In addition, policy research and classroom observations in Sweden indicate that recent educational policy reforms and pedagogical practices in VET focus primarily on lower achieving students (Nylund and Rosvall, 2016), although this is not necessarily an accurate characterisation of VET students.

While most students are 16 when they enter VET in Sweden the situation in Iceland is different and VET students are older, on average, than those on academic tracks (Statistics Iceland, 2016). Over 70% of students graduating from higher education preparatory programmes are approximately 20 years old (or younger), while at least 80% of those graduating from VET programmes, are older than 20. In fact, a quarter of students graduating from VET programmes in Iceland are 25-29 years old (Statistics Iceland, 2016). It seems to have become more common in Iceland for people to enter VET programmes after the age of 20, which is usually the age at which young people complete the matriculation exam and enter university. The different age profile has added to the diversity of the VET student population in Iceland.

Increasing diversity of the student population has been widely recognized in relation to different educational levels and one of the issues arising is how teachers react. Increasing diversity in terms of students' educational backgrounds is widely recognised, and is something to which teachers are compelled to respond (Messiou and Ainscow, 2015; van Middelkoop et al., 2017). As research has shown that teacher performance influences student achievement it is important to consider how teachers do this. According to Van Middelkoop et al. (2017), even if teachers understand the influence of students' diversity on their levels of achievement in general this is not necessarily reflected in their teaching practices.

Some VET programmes have traditionally attracted more boys or girls. For example, construction, and vehicle and transport programmes are traditionally male-dominated, whereas health, pedagogy and hair dressing programmes are usually female-dominated. There are also known gender-related differences in pedagogic practices in VET. For example, female-dominated VET programmes are more likely to involve classes in more traditional classrooms and schools than male-dominated VET programmes, which are often based in industrial or vehicle halls as they need larger work areas, (cf. Hjelmér et al 2010). Due to space restrictions, we do not address the gender aspects further here, but comment on them where there are known gender-related differences.

Theoretical framework and aim

As already noted, there are hierarchies which are established through social practices by the separation of the world and the word. Bernstein (2000) helps analysis of this separation through recognition of rules governing the recontextualization of knowledge from a field of production to a field of reproduction, for example from curriculum to pedagogic practice or workplace practice to

pedagogic practice. He describes recontextualisation rules as analytically related to two embedded discourses: a discourse of skills (world) and a discourse of social order (word). However, Bernstein also argues that there is a single pedagogic discourse, although it is commonly approached and perceived as two separate discourses: 'as if education is about values on the one hand, and about competence on the other' (2000, p. 32). Different fields of knowledge production can be defined as origins of the components of professional knowledge: disciplinary knowledge, applied interdisciplinary knowledge and specialised practical knowledge pertaining to the field of practice (Young and Muller, 2014). In our analysis we consider whether content recontextualisation (Evans et al., 2010) of workplace knowledge into teaching practices includes education about both (workplace) values and competences, i.e. if there is focus on skills *or* social order or if they are treated as a single discourse. We use Bernstein's key concepts of *classification*, referring to the strength of boundaries between categories, and *framing*, referring to the knowledge transfer and acquisition processes involved in teachers' and students' daily practices. Here we take *classification* to refer to what type of knowledge is considered important. In this context, the notions of generalising and particularising pedagogic practices presented by Young (2006) and Hordern (2014) are important, i.e. knowledge as skills, knowledge as social order, or integration of both skills and knowledge of social order. *Framing* refers to whether tasks are addressed by students individually or in groups and whether tasks are framed as having one known solution or if they are more open. According to Bernstein's terminology (2000), when students have little influence over tasks that are selected in advance, the tasks have strong framing. In other words, the teacher decides what is communicated. Conversely, when students have substantial influence over tasks, the framing is weak. Framing also refers to pacing, sequencing and selection, where pacing refers to the rate of expected acquisition of the sequencing rules while strong framing of selection refers to age, sex and ability. Individualisation occurs in strong framing since its ideal 'act of acquisition will be solitary, privatized and competitive' (Bernstein, 1990 p. 53).

The aim here is to examine how teachers describe student diversity, how individualisation appears within the pedagogic practices in VET classes in both Sweden and Iceland, and to discuss their pedagogic practices in that context. We consider our findings in terms of their implications for access to specific types of general knowledge which relate to civic and workplace contexts. That is, we are less interested in whether students can simply transfer general knowledge from one task to another than in whether they can transfer knowledge about issues referring to social order, such as ethics and understanding their own position in relation to others from one situation to another. Our prime objective here is to analyse how policy plays out in practice, i.e. what individualisation as a way of framing pedagogic practices leads to in terms of classification of skills or social order as important knowledge. We are not seeking to compare the strength of classification and framing in the two countries (although analysis of how policy plays out in practice in two countries inevitably includes comparative elements). The aim is to identify common recurring patterns exemplifying how social order operates, despite differences in national contexts and policies.

Research projects and method

We draw on data from three research projects, two conducted in Sweden and one in Iceland, which explored teaching practices in upper secondary schools and VET programmes. Data were collected in these projects through classroom observations and interviews during the period 2009-2016.

The research project in Iceland

The Icelandic data used in the current analysis were collected as part of a research project, *Upper secondary school practices in Iceland* (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2016), which is still ongoing although the data collection phase has been completed.

Data were collected from nine upper secondary schools during 2013-2014, selected to give a stratified sample of the 31 upper secondary schools in Iceland at the time. In each school the research team collected classroom observations according to a schedule of randomly chosen students on different tracks (see below). School administrators and teachers were also interviewed.

Of 23 interviewed teachers, six (one female) were involved in VET programmes (carpentry, electro-technics, cooking and culinary arts, hairdressing, wall and floor covering, or machining and engine maintenance). All the VET teachers had previously been observed in a classroom and this, along with availability (based on teaching schedules), determined which teachers were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured, utilising an interview guide that touched on diverse topics ranging from curriculum to assessment and aimed to get a good overview of upper secondary school practices. The interview guide included a request for teachers to reflect on the student group in terms of diversity and drop-out. The interviews, which lasted 40-80 minutes, were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The interviewees have all been given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

In total, 16 VET classes were observed (12.3% of the 130 classes observed during the study as a whole). During observation researchers recorded teaching practices (what was being taught and how), student participation and engagement (what students did), as well as interactions among students and between students and teachers. The researchers also recorded observations about the classroom environment, including the physical layout and culture. Durations of the classes ranged from 40 minutes to 4 hours, but most lasted 40-80 minutes.

The research projects in Sweden

The data used in the current analysis for Sweden were collected in parts of two larger ethnographic research projects, *Active citizenship?* (data production 2008-2009) and *Critical education on vocational subjects?* (data production 2016-2017). The latter is still ongoing, although data collection for two of the four sub-studies has been completed. In the *Active citizenship?* project two classes were followed through their first year in upper secondary school: one social science class and one vehicle maintenance and transport class. In the present article data pertaining to the latter class are used. In the *Critical education on vocational subjects?* project three classes were followed for two days in a pilot study and six classes for their whole first year in upper secondary school. The programmes studied were vehicle maintenance and transport, restaurant management, and health and social care. Apart from the pilot study in both projects the classes were studied through classroom observation, conducted through school visits 1-2 days a week throughout their first school year in upper secondary school. All students and their teachers, including head teachers, were offered the opportunity to be interviewed.

The collected VET dataset includes 12 interviews with teachers (five of whom were female) working in the three VET fields mentioned above, i.e. vehicle maintenance and transport, restaurant management, and health and social care. The interviews were conducted using an interview guide which drew on the observations and information from students. All teacher interviews included sections in which they reflected on the student group in terms of diversity. The interviews, which lasted 50-75 minutes, were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The interviewees have all been given pseudonyms to protect their identity. Parts of the research material produced in the

Active citizenship? project have been previously reported (Hjelmér and Rosvall, 2017; Hjelmér et al., 2014; Hjelmér et al., 2010; Rosvall, 2015; Rosvall et al., 2017), but in studies addressing different research questions and applying different analytical concepts. Nonetheless these earlier outputs will be used to contextualise our present discussions when appropriate.

Data and analysis

The data from the above research projects that we use here comprise interviews with six VET teachers in Iceland and 12 in Sweden, and field notes from 41 classroom observations.

The classroom observations and interviews were analysed thematically (Clarke and Braun, 2016). After the first read-through of the transcripts and listening to the interview recordings, the transcripts were initially coded by classification and framing (Bernstein, 2000). The codes were subsequently documented and organized, and the relevant data were aggregated into a single document. After this round the interviews were re-read using the same coding scheme, to increase the reliability of the coding. In our coding, recurrent themes mainly related individualisation to non-observable or underlying attributes of diversity. In this article we focus on themes relating to the framing of relevant pedagogic practices i.e. individualisation as a way to manage diversity, that were most recurrent in the interviews with teachers, and its implications for classification (focus primarily on skills, primarily on knowledge related to social order, or both in an integrated fashion). Our theoretical stance informed the analytical process.

In the research projects, in both Sweden and Iceland, teachers were observed in their classrooms. This article focuses on describing the pedagogical practices generally observed, i.e. the dominant methods and task focus. We are not claiming in any way to offer a quantitative analysis of the observed practices. Our aim is to present the most prominent issues in classroom observations related to the aim.

Results

This section is divided into three parts. The first presents findings on how teachers talk about the diversity of their student group and how classification and framing occur in their pedagogic practices, mostly drawing on transcripts of the interviews with teachers. The second presents findings on individualisation in practice (primarily focusing on framing), mostly as seen in the classroom observation data, and the third discusses the content of the individualised pedagogy in terms of its focus on skills or knowledge of social order or their integrated treatment (primarily focusing on classification).

Teachers' descriptions: Pedagogic practices and student diversity

One of the most prominent findings from the interviews was teachers' characterization of the students as a diverse group, in terms of ability, interest and (in Iceland) age. According to the teachers, student diversity was clearly related to higher levels of enrolment in upper secondary schools in general:

The youngest students are more immature than they were. Not because young people are more immature in general, but because now some are enrolling in school who previously would never have continued after finishing mandatory education. Especially those with learning disabilities and behaviour difficulties. (Teacher interview, Construction, Icelandic context)

I think there have been ups and downs. From having a whole group of students that almost educate themselves in the beginning [of the teaching career], students that all the time want to know more...to students where there are lots of social and ability problems that provoke difficulties. I think you can relate this to the groups' median in enrolment scores. A group with high enrolment scores have fewer

social problems. The enrolment scores have gone down gradually lately. (Teacher interview, Vehicle and transport, Swedish context)

In the teacher interviews diversity was referred to in relation to many factors, such as maturity, social problems, lack of self-esteem and ability. However, some comments suggested that the reputation of VET as a secondary choice might also play a role. One Icelandic teacher talked about students entering VET after completing university studies which they had done “to satisfy their mothers”, referencing the conception that all parents want their children to have a university degree. Another teacher talks about getting ‘better’ students from rural areas than urban areas and attributes this to “less ‘cultural snobbery’ in the countryside”. There is therefore some suggestion here that the status of VET might contribute to student diversity as academically stronger students generally choose the academic path to higher education. This corresponds with statistics on increased upper secondary school enrolment and suggests that students enrolling in VET are more diverse, as they now include both students with low merits from compulsory school (those who would not have previously continued with their education) and those with higher merits.

According to teachers, the diversity of the students was often an impetus for them framing their pedagogic practices to individualise the pace and tailor instruction to different abilities, as described here by one teacher:

Class taught through individual assignments – introduction and lecture maybe in the first two classes and then they start working, and even after the second class of the semester the students are in different places because “some get it right away, others take longer”. (Teacher interview, VET field missing, Icelandic context)

Another explanation of the framing of the individualised pedagogic practices could be found in answers reflecting the educational values and ideals of the teachers in assisting students with low academic merits:

Have to be careful how they build the programme – a lot of the students come from compulsory schools with grades of 2-3 [out of 10, authors remark] and no self-confidence. They try to build the programme so that these students “realise that they can do something, so they don’t experience themselves as losers, so we’ve tried to get them to not take the more academic subjects during the first semester”. (Teacher interview, VET field missing, Icelandic context)

Conceptualisations of VET students as having low academic ability were common, and difficulties in putting a lot of pressure on the student were raised many times. The Swedish school inspectorate (2017) and other studies (Hjelmér and Rosvall, 2017; Korp, 2012) have also noted low expectations in VET. However, research has shown that students are not always content with these low expectations (Nylund and Rosvall, 2016; Ledman, 2015) and they can be quite critical about how their time is used (Hjelmér et al., 2010). Nevertheless, the teacher’s comment above reflects what many other teachers in both the Icelandic and Swedish contexts referred to as low academic ability and a lack of self-esteem in general, especially in reading and writing.

Interest was also mentioned as an aspect of diversity that teachers found difficult to manage:

Before I started teaching on the programme I thought that everyone that had chosen a vocational programme was interested in that profession. That has not been the case. About a third seem to have chosen the programme because there are no other realistic options. (Teacher interview, Health and social care, Swedish context)

The lack of interest mentioned here can be seen to reflect the reality that students with low academic merits may often have no other realistic choice of programme. However, teachers’

understanding of the lack of interest amongst VET students has been associated in other studies with excessively low expectations and/or slow pace in VET pedagogic practices (Korp, 2012; Skolinspektionen, 2017).

In Iceland, variability in students' age was another key topic. In Iceland, students can enter VET at any age, but academic programmes can only be started up to the age of 25 (while the limit for starting an upper secondary programme in Sweden is 19). An issue frequently raised in the Icelandic data was the difference between teaching youngsters and adults. As one teachers explains:

A few years ago, we started to get older students into the programme. Also, the students coming straight from compulsory schools often have some learning disability. So, there is increasing diversity [in the student group] – both very strong students who have finished university education and very young students with learning disabilities. It is very difficult to teach such a diverse group with different needs. (Teacher interview, VET field missing, Icelandic context)

Another teacher explained this difficulty in more detail:

Students arrive with very different attitudes depending on why they enter the programme. The older students are interested, engaged and focused from the beginning. They are there to learn. The ones coming straight from compulsory school who have not really decided [what they want to do] are often less manageable in the beginning. (Teacher interview, VET field missing, Icelandic context)

A wider age span among the students in the Icelandic context than in the Swedish in Bernstein's terminology refers to weaker framing in selection. By the Icelandic teachers weak framing in selection was referred to add to the complexity of the diversity within the student group, with older students often having stronger academic backgrounds and more motivation to learn than younger students. This was seen as a challenge in the framing of pedagogic practice as in pacing and sequencing of coursework and instruction. Thus weak framing of selection seemed to be used to argue for strong framing of pacing and sequencing.

The results clearly show that the teachers are required to manoeuvre their pedagogic practices within a complex web of diversity. It is therefore not surprising that many turn to individualisation as a solution. However, strong framing of tasks in terms of pace, transmission of content and working individually influences what is possible to include or classify as important pedagogic content, as discussed in the following sections.

Individualisation in practice

Individualisation was the dominant framing method observed in the classrooms, in both Iceland and Sweden, and appeared in two forms. The first related to assignments and assessment and the second to pacing. We also saw instances where the students themselves interrupted the individualised framing through spontaneous collaboration and discussion.

The classroom observations of the VET classes in Iceland revealed that teachers tended to rely on individualisation. In most of the classes observed students completed a clearly defined individual assignment during the class while the teacher assisted students on an individual basis. The individual assignments observed were usually well defined and had a single known solution, i.e. were characterised by strong framing. Their purpose in most cases seemed to be to teach the students some vocationally task-related knowledge, for instance students in electrical studies calculated electrical currents in illustrative circuits and carpentry students built a footstool. Thus, their pedagogic practices were characterised by strong classification towards skills. A similar setup was seen in the Swedish male-dominated contexts: Teachers tracked students' completion of

assignments in ways which lent themselves to an individualised pedagogic approach, as the following excerpts show.

The teachers had sheets with the boys' names in one column and names of their assigned tasks in separate boxes in a row. When the boys completed a task, the teacher marked the corresponding box with a cross. When the boys started a new course, the teacher explained to them the criteria required to achieve each level of merit or grade. One of the criteria required to get a passing grade was to get a cross marked on each box of the task sheet, indicating that the student in question had completed all of the assigned tasks. (Field notes, Vehicle and transport, Swedish context)

The students were expected to work on the tasks individually and start the next one when they had finished the first. The written instructions for the tasks were assumed to be sufficient to enable the boys to complete them on their own. If they required further assistance, they could ask the teacher for help. These observations clearly indicate (as in the Icelandic case) strong framing and classification towards skills. Here, we find an example of knowledge recontextualisation from applied interdisciplinary fields of knowledge production (Young and Muller, 2014). Framing of pedagogic practices through working with the written instructions exemplifies the orientation of workplace knowledge through content recontextualisation (Evans et al., 2010) towards applied rather than general knowledge. Thus, it is deprived of its full potential to help the students acquire abilities to put everyday work into different perspectives, and hence includes little of what Bernstein refers to as perspectives of social order (see also Ledman, Rosvall & Nylund, 2018). In addition, in group interviews the boys stated that they found it difficult to understand the tasks and that it often took a long time to get help from the teacher. When we discussed the lessons during the interview, Tomas said:

The tasks do not work out well. I do not learn anything. It would be better to have tasks that he [the teacher] explained better and for everyone to work on the same task after telling us what to do so we could ask each other questions and help each other. At present, the teacher walks from one person to the next and it gets stressful when he doesn't have time to help us all. (Group interview, Vehicle and transport, Swedish context)

In other words, Tomas formulates a critique of the individualisation and thus strong framing and pacing it implies. There was some variation in degree to which students could set their own pace in completing individual tasks. Some teachers had set out an assignment schedule at the start of the semester and the students completed assignments at their own pace, moving from one assignment to the next, as described above. Other teachers tried to frame the work have the whole class working on the same assignment, even if they worked on an individual basis. When students all worked on the same assignment they either had to complete it during class or at home:

The students are working with knowledge of vegetables. The teacher says: "You need to finish your task today otherwise you need to work at home." and continues, "Put on your earphones so you do not disturb each other". My reflection: The teacher invites the students to listen to music. (Field notes, Restaurant and management, Swedish context)

Individualisation was therefore observed on two levels as a way of framing pace in both countries: class level or semester level. Class level individualisation means that the teaching practices involve the teacher assisting and teaching individual students during class. Semester level individualisation adds a layer to this with students fully determining their own pace through the semester, meaning that students in one class could all be working on different assignments. Discussion with teachers during those classes revealed that they allowed students to attend other classes to complete their assignments and the requirement for passing was that all the assignments had to be completed during the semester:

The teacher says the students are working from a schedule set at the beginning of the semester. He says most are behind schedule and they often do not manage to finish the last assignment, but he lets that slide (but not until the student have at least attempted it). Students must a grade of at least 4.5 for each assignment to pass the class. (Field notes, Carpentry, Icelandic context)

A similar pattern was found in Sweden, where the practices were characterised by strong classification as students could not influence the content of their tasks, only how quickly they completed them. In these cases, progress could be hampered by lack of access to the teacher who needed to approve each task as it was completed. In informal interviews conducted during the classroom observations and during the group interview students expressed their frustration at spending time waiting for teachers:

He [the teacher] has a help list where we can write our names to get help, but he never follows it. You'd be able to finish the course in half the time if there was one more teacher. You might wait for one hour. If you've finished one task and want to get your work approved, you can write your name on the help list and go for lunch. That's how long it takes to get help. (Interview, Vehicle and transport, Swedish context)

Framing demonstrated in an individualised approach seemed to have similar drawbacks in the Icelandic context as the teachers frequently repeated instructions and demonstrations, while the students often had to wait for assistance. The students were often observed being inactive while waiting for the teacher as shown in the following three examples from three different classes:

Two students wait for the teacher to assist them – stand and wait while the teacher is helping a third student. One is doing something on his phone while waiting. (Field notes, Carpentry, Icelandic context).

One student sits by her workstation and waits for the teacher to come and assist her (starts to fiddle with her phone after a minute). (Field notes, Hairdressing, Icelandic context).

Student stands up and looks for the solution example [these were available in a folder], does not find it – waits to ask teacher while he finishes assisting another student. (Field notes, Construction, Icelandic context)

Individualisation can be difficult to manage, both for the teacher who must repeat instructions and assist many students simultaneously, and for the students who cannot continue with their tasks and may not have an overview of what needs to be done. The benefits are that students all have the same opportunity for learning as they all have to complete the same tasks. However, semester level individualisation makes it difficult to create opportunities for critical reflection, discuss questions at a more general level, or propose solutions on a group basis, i.e. possibilities to discuss questions related to social order.

Although individualisation seemed to be the most common way of framing pedagogic practices observed in the VET classes, sometimes students countered it with acts of cooperation and collaboration. In the example below, more experienced students help less experienced students, apparently through their own initiative:

Interviewer observed that during the latter half of the class, students from the next class started to come in and start to work. According to the teacher this is common and the more advanced students assist those who are less advanced. (Interview notes where the interviewer and teacher are discussing the class the interviewer just observed, Icelandic context).

Observations repeatedly showed that students assisted each other and often sought assistance from classmates who were further along in the relevant assignment. In one instance in Iceland, it was obvious that a group of older students interrupted the strong framing towards individualisation and

were *de facto* assistant teachers when the teacher was not available. In another instance in Iceland spontaneous cooperation emerged although the task was supposed to be solved individually. In other class observations, similar behaviours were observed - not spontaneous teamwork as such but coming about when some students could easily complete tasks long before the class was over. In many cases, students could then leave the class, missing learning opportunities because they were offered no further work (cf. Hjelmér and Rosvall, 2017).

Group work (such as group exams or assignments) as a way of framing the pedagogic practices was rarely observed in either country, especially on male-dominated programmes, confirming findings of previous studies (Österlind, 2005; Korp, 2012). In the Icelandic classes organized group work was only seen in a single instance when students collaborated on parts of a larger assignment spanning two weeks. In all the other observed classes students worked individually, and any cooperation seen was spontaneous rather than planned by the teachers. Graded tasks or exams were usually carried out individually.

This is of course not unusual in a testing situation, but when compared to higher education preparatory programmes (Hjelmér & Rosvall 2017; Norlund 2011) it is notable how few occasions the vocational programmes offer for students to argue against an assumed other. In programmes preparing students for higher education, individual multiple-choice exams are usually combined with tasks of a more deliberative nature (Rosvall 2011). In the VET classes observed this was rarely the case.

Content of individualised pedagogy: Skills or knowledge of social order

The individualised pedagogic practices seen in the VET classrooms suggest an overarching focus on labour skills. Knowledge needed to practice a trade can be classified as many things, from skills required for specific tasks to reflection on how specific practices may be integrated into other contexts. Muller (2009) has shown that this also has implications for contextual or conceptual coherence in curriculum orientations (see also Evans, Guile & Harris, 2011). The latter can take different perspectives, such as social order (workplace ethics or environmental issues), or constitute generic knowledge of more general procedures. Examples of teachers referring to a more general level were observed, but in most cases this was only related to general procedures that could be transferred between specific work-related tasks, as in the example below:

The teacher shows the student what to do and explains: "...always comb well between, use the corner of the hairdryer, always comb well. See? Do this first, comb well between. Then you can finish the wave". The student nods and starts working. Teacher moves on to the next student asking for help (Field notes, Hairdressing, Icelandic context).

Classroom observations suggested that the assignments and learning opportunities were primarily focused on vocational knowledge as skills, related to the task at hand or procedures for carrying out similar tasks. As these were VET classes this is understandable and is not problematic *per se*, but the domination of those tasks is problematic. Despite the overarching educational policy of both countries, features of what we have here referred to as the social order were rare in the classes observed. Educational policy emphasises that contextualised knowledge should introduce perspectives on ethics, environment, international trends, and history in Sweden (Skolverket, 2011 p. 7) and for example sustainability, democracy, and equality in Iceland (Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Schools, 2011), i.e. content that enables discussion and reflection on social order. In VET that could include: work ethics; biological, sociological, and environmental sustainability; international perspectives on issues such as workplace racism, gender, or globalisation of labour; or historical understanding of hierarchies within specific trades (for example unions versus confederations of enterprises). As mentioned above, these elements were rare. There were however,

some examples, primarily in the female-dominated programmes, which showed some elements of perspectives shifting from skills to knowledge of social order (Bernstein, 2000). In the following example from Sweden the class considered ethics in general in relation to intimacy as well as ethics more specifically related to racism:

The students have had three weeks of workplace learning. Most of them have been in establishments for elderly care. They are talking about issues related to personal intimacy when washing an older person, both for the person and for the student. Suddenly one student with an immigrant background says: "One old man did not let me touch him just because I am Muslim. Only my supervisor could do that." The discussion continues on racism in relation to working with elderly as well as racism in society at large. (Field notes, Health and social care, Swedish context.)

In discussing both intimacy and racism there was a shift between how those concepts were experienced in relation to a workplace task and more general experiences of social order. However, such observations were rare in our material. In another exception in the Icelandic context, the teacher and students discussed how to greet and work with customers in hairdressing, the teacher emphasising the ethical dimension of accepting customers who either ask for the impossible or something that could ruin their hair. In other cases, such as in classes where the teacher touched on raw source materials available locally or international regulations, obvious opportunities for connecting the discussion to more general topics of social order, for example sustainability and ethics were not taken up.

The Swedish curriculum states: "education should develop students' understanding, both of their own and the profession's importance in working and societal life" (Skolverket, 2012; p. 77). What is stated in the curriculum as 'understanding' seems, according to our observations, to be manifest in specific tasks oriented towards acquisition of specific skills. Considering the amount of observation that was carried out, and that the Swedish students were followed throughout a whole year, there seems to be an imbalance between learning skills and knowledge of social order or perspective shifting (see also Rosvall, 2011; Niemi and Rosvall, 2013; Nylund and Rosvall, 2016).

In the interviews with teachers, we found little indication of awareness that their strong framing towards individualised, task-focused pedagogic practices might exclude more general knowledge of social order. We want to stress that the issue is not the individualisation of the tasks *per se*, but rather that the individualisation seems to exclude opportunities to learn about social order and abstract issues that should be covered according to the overarching curricula in Sweden and Iceland. There should not be a hierarchical relation between the word and the world; in Bernstein's (2000) terms discourses about values and competences should be integrated. Teachers mostly seemed to strongly classify their practices and rely on subject-specific curricula, supposing that they incorporate the visions of ethics, values and dissemination embedded in the overarching curricula. We found little evidence that the subject curricula in fact do this. We did find some examples of skills and general knowledge being referred to as integrated (cf. Bernstein, 2000). However, general knowledge was primarily seen as something necessary to do specific tasks, ignoring the wider intentions of the curriculum related to social order:

The students break up to work in the vehicle hall. Ola [the teacher] and I follow them a few steps behind. Ola says: To be a good vehicle mechanic one needs to be able to think abstractly. You can clearly see that those who are good at maths become good mechanics. Even writing is good when it comes to abstract work in the mechanical field. (Field notes, Vehicle and transport, Swedish context).

Ola was the mentor of a vehicle and transport class that was observed through a whole year. Every now and then he would emphasise more abstract thinking related to the mechanical field as

described in the field note above. However, he only referred to workplace ethics and more generic understandings of social order regarding one's position within a workplace once in recorded observations during the followed year (as reported in Rosvall 2011). He used the boys' dissatisfaction with their mathematics classes at a mentor-class meeting as an example of the boys' position in relation to him and the head. He also taught them which arguments were valid in conflicts and how to write a protocol, since, he argued, the written word has more weight. He later used this knowledge as an example when conflicts occurred in the vehicle hall. He would say things such as "Now you can think of yourself as a mechanic, me as a middle boss and the head as the owner of the company". This illustrates recontextualisation strategies in which 'real life' events are used to help learners prepare for vocational activity by helping them to understand meanings of important concepts and heuristics (cf. Evans, Guile & Harris 2011). However, although Ola considered such general understandings of social order to be important, this was seldom reflected in his pedagogic practice, i.e. important content usually seemed strongly classified towards skills rather than social order.

This discrepancy could be attributed to vocational teachers' prior workplace experiences and educational training (both their own vocational education and teacher education) hindering what Fejes and Köpsén (2014) call boundary crossing, and we would refer to as integrating issues of skills and social order. They argue that the education and workplace experience of teachers they interviewed included little of what we here define as social order or discussions about workplace ethics. In addition, among the teachers who participated in our research there was a common understanding of the importance of making students employable. This led them towards framing individualised pedagogic practices, because in most cases they equated employability with demonstrated ability to perform specific procedural work-related tasks. Köpsén (2014) and Isopahkala-Bouret (2010) have noted that vocational education teachers identify more strongly with their former vocation than as teachers, which may further explain their focus on individualised specific work-related tasks and skills.

We noted teachers in Sweden making comments that clearly showed which kinds of knowledge they classified as important, such as "the students do not want to read, they want to be in the vehicle hall" or "they need to do a lot of practice in the vehicle hall in order to be employable". In contrast, we never heard those teachers refer to or classify work place ethics to be important to becoming employable, even though for example they occasionally referred to sexual harassment as a problem within their field, for example vehicle trades.

Conclusions and discussion

Individualisation as a norm and way of framing within pedagogic practices was observed to be central to teachers' responses to addressing diversity in their classrooms. The flexibility offered by the curricula seems to have been reduced to educational individualism which ignores substantial parts of the broader social dimensions that the curricula are intended to cover. Social dimensions can thus be seen to be being downplayed with regards to determining what is important knowledge, in favour of more specific workplace knowledge and skills (cf. Bernstein, 2000). This should not be understood as an intended effect. We conclude that this unintended effect comes about not mainly because teachers are unaware of the social dimensions in the curriculum. Rather, it comes about as a result of teachers' priorities and compromises while they are in the midst of social interaction with students *in situ*, struggling to balance various tasks, norms and policies. Teachers must react to multiple factors, of which student diversity is but one and vocationalism or employability is another. To make students employable, teachers seem to focus on specific labour market skills and, in dealing with student diversity, frame pedagogic practices as individual tasks. However, as for example Hickox and Moore

(1992) have argued, allowing education to adapt strongly to labour market needs at a time when work and workplace skills are rapidly evolving might be fallacious since it seems to separate morals and skills (see also Down et al., 2017). As Young (2008) argues in line with Bernstein: “the vocational curriculum always has (or should have) two intertwined purposes: providing access to the (disciplinary) knowledge that is transforming work, and acquiring job-specific skills and knowledge” (p. 170). Based on our research we stress that while education systems in the two focal Nordic contexts differ, all of the schools from which we collected data seem to address student diversity through individualisation. Similar phenomena have been noted in Anglophone countries (Wheelahan, 2015; Avis, 2006). Thus, this illustrates what we can learn from cross-country analysis. If it is not the differences in the organisation of VET systems that make a difference, one could claim that some hegemonic understandings of what VET is seems to prevail at a societal level and be reproduced through educational practices (cf. Brockmann, 2012).

We would argue, however, that there are positive steps which could be taken with regards to deepening teachers’ capacity to accommodate diversity in their classrooms. The increased diversity of VET students in upper secondary schools creates a particular challenge for teachers in this area, particularly as educational policy in these two countries and most other European countries requires teachers to provide inclusive education.

The teachers participating in our studies did not talk directly about diversity and individualisation in terms of cause and effect. However, analysis of the pedagogic practices and teacher interviews, in conjunction, identified links between their descriptions of diversity and their framing and classification of pedagogic practices. In the teacher interviews the reasons for diversity, and thus for individualised pedagogic practices, were multiple, including maturity, social problems, and that these days almost all students continue to upper secondary education. It must also be taken into consideration that upper secondary education is increasingly important for employment opportunities and career trajectories (Braunerhjelm et al., 2009) as well as social justice and social mobility (Lundahl and Olson, 2013). Regardless of the reasons or these arguments, our analysis of pedagogic practices and how teachers talk about VET students highlights structural problems with VET. The teachers’ arguments about new enrolment patterns provide an example: according to teachers, VET cohorts now include students who are more immature, with lower social economic status and lower self-esteem, than earlier cohorts. If so, we must ask how education at large and pedagogic practices in particular need to be organised not only to provide those students with employment possibilities and career options but also to give them access to civic participation as agents capable of autonomously generating change for themselves. Both employability and civic knowledge require the development of reflexivity, meaning the capacity to shift perspectives from skills to social order, although the two are inseparable (Edwards et al., 2002; Bernstein, 2000). This knowledge can be acquired through carrying out individualised tasks, but we argue that training through group activities is also required, involving activities such as arguing, reflecting and discussing matters with others who have different understandings of the issues. Moreover, structural and systematic thinking not only enables participation in societal conversations, it is also a powerful tool to explore alternatives and generate innovation for social change (cf. Gamble, 2014; Ledman, Rosvall, Nylund, 2018).

It is important to note that we have no intention of blaming teachers. As Bernstein (2000) states, education is not isolated from society and, thus, reflections of society are likely to be found in education. The portrayal of the VET student as low-achieving and not interested in more academic task is both explicit and implicit in media and political discourse. For example, to solve problems of throughput in VET the conservative and liberal alliance reduced the general and academic elements

of VET education through the Swedish upper secondary school reform in 2011, explicitly to make VET more workplace-oriented (Nylund et al., 2017). However, the stricter recontextualisation towards workplace knowledge and skills, and abolition of eligibility for university, were followed by a decrease in number of students choosing VET upper secondary programmes, i.e. it devalued VET rather than enhancing its prestige. In Iceland as well, VET is often discussed in the context of youth unemployment and strategies for decreasing dropout and easing re-entry into the educational system (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012, 2014b). This discourse is strong although at the same time industries and professional organizations affiliated with VET are eager to raise the profile or status of VET education and present it as a serious alternative to academically focused upper secondary education ending with a matriculation exam. There is some tension between those goals, although most stakeholders would probably regard both as important.

López-Fogués (2012) has noted on the policy level, not least the European level, a “will to pursuing a form of VET that is able to embrace issues that transcend enrolments and economics and that centre on education and civil society” (p. 565), in line with our argument here. However, our research identifies a gap between policy and practice. It should be noted, as Grollmann (2008) does, that many demands are imposed on vocational teachers, as shown by the following examples. Employers and industry stakeholders require VET teachers to keep up with their trade. Policy-makers demand that VET teachers keep up with curriculum development. Changes in the educational system require teachers to keep up with evolving demands based on student diversity when enrolment patterns increase. Schools require teachers to keep up with educational technology, instructional methods and materials - and furthermore often require collaboration between teachers from multiple disciplines, such as language and mathematics. Bridging the gap between policy and practice might be too much to ask from the VET teacher alone, thus we argue that structural changes are clearly needed.

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