



# Vocational students' citizenship education as a conditioned practice: School leaders' and teachers' perspectives of history, religious education, science studies, and social studies

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## Abstract

Swedish vocational education and training programmes have become increasingly aligned with labour market demands and employability, with consequent risks of marginalisation of citizenship education and formation. Four subjects that have traditionally played important roles in this, history, religious education, science, and social studies, are now only taught in short courses that are minor elements of the programmes. To obtain insights into the teaching and learning conditions in these key subjects for citizenship formation in Swedish VET programmes, school leaders and teachers were interviewed. The analysis, informed by frame factory theory and Biesta's conceptualisations of three functions of education, revealed clear differences in the school leaders' and teachers' views of the conditions. School leaders articulated problems related to internal frame factors, such as the teachers' engagement and students' attitudes to the subjects, while teachers referred to external frame factors, such as the organisation of teaching. However, when talking about the VET students and their learning, both school leaders and teachers expressed notions of the students as in need of qualification and socialisation, thereby focusing on preparation of the students for their future professional and civic roles, with little room for substantial subjectification.

**Keywords:** citizen formation, upper secondary school, vocational programmes, educational functions, frame factors, subjectification



## Introduction

The national curriculum for Swedish upper secondary school states that all programmes and activities should be permeated by education for democracy (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). This is conceptualised here as any education that contributes to students' development of citizenship and hence both individual students' democratic participation and democracy in society. We base our notion of citizenship education on *pedagogic rights* as advocated by Bernstein (2000). This is the right for all individuals to acquire the means for critical understanding and new possibilities, the right 'to be included socially, intellectually, culturally and personally' (p. xx) and the right to participate in 'procedures whereby order is constructed, maintained and changed' (p. xxi). The first of these rights is dependent on students' acquisition of 'powerful' esoteric/theoretical knowledge, which refers to their development of intellectual, social, moral, and civic power (Wheelahan, 2007; Young, 2008). A critique is that certain conceptualisations of such knowledge are underpinned by a rationalistic bias, favouring propositional and theoretical knowledge. This bias may exclude practical and tacit elements that are important for the students' understanding and personal development (Carlgren, 2020). Following Biesta (2009, 2020, 2022) we also recognise three key functions of citizenship education: qualification through acquisition of the knowledge and skills needed to participate in democratic processes; socialisation to the norms and values of society; and, most importantly, subjectification (i.e., becoming a subject). Although the three functions are interlinked, subjectification should be at the centre of education according to Biesta (2020). Subjectification is a relational process that provides students opportunities to meet the world as a subject, or first person, involving the acquisition and use of knowledge that is potentially transformative for both the individual and society (cf. Hopmann, 2007).

The Swedish 3-year vocational education and training programmes (VETPs) include compulsory courses in history, religious education, science studies, and social studies. They were gradually included in VETP curricula from the late 1980s to 2011 due to their perceived potential to promote citizenship education (Hellstenius, 2011; Ledman, 2014). Despite the official stipulation that democracy should permeate all education, citizenship education is less prominent in VETPs than in the higher education preparatory programmes (HEPPs) in Swedish upper secondary schools (Nylund et al., 2017). Moreover, the 2011 curriculum reduced the emphasis on democratic objectives generally, and hence the proportion of time allocated to the foundational subjects<sup>1</sup> in the VET programmes (Nylund, 2011). Arguments for this decision were to a large extent based on an understanding of VET students as mainly practically oriented and not interested in learning theoretical subjects (Terning & Tsagalidis, 2020). A conclusion of previous research is that VETPs tend to be heavily oriented towards socialisation

in line with workplace and work sector cultures, with consequent marginalisation of citizenship education and subjectification (cf. Nylund et al., 2020; Rönnlund et al., 2019). Partly to assist efforts to counter this marginalisation, a research and development project (further described in the Methodology section) was established in which teachers and researchers collaborated to develop teaching and didactical knowledge about citizenship education in the four mentioned foundational subjects. The collaborative process in the project raised questions regarding conditions influencing associated classroom practices. This article presents the results from an interview study with upper secondary school leaders responsible for VET programmes and teachers of the four subjects. The aim is to enrich understanding of conditions that influence teaching and learning in the four subjects – as key elements of the students’ citizenship education – in Swedish VETP settings. The research was guided by the following questions: What are school leaders’ and teachers’ respective knowledge and perceptions of the possibilities and constraints in teaching and learning in history, religious education, science studies, and social studies? What perceptions and logics inform the citizenship education enabled by courses in the four subjects, and which functions of education (qualification, socialisation, subjectification) are emphasised in them?

### Swedish citizenship education and VET

Following a reform in 1970, upper secondary schools in Sweden have offered both VETPs and HEPPs, and now 30 percent of the upper secondary students attend a VETP (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024). The VETPs are largely gendered, reflecting gender divisions in the labour market, with some programmes directed towards ‘feminine’ caring work (e.g., the Health and Social care programme) and others towards ‘masculine’ production work (e.g., the Building and Construction programme), but there are also some less gendered, service-oriented programmes (e.g., the Hotel and Tourism programme) (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2024). In the Swedish context, VETPs are mainly chosen by students with parents with no higher education (SCB, 2023). The VETP curriculum has also been found to reproduce social positions (Nylund et al., 2017).

As upper secondary vocational education is organised very differently in different national contexts (Kap, 2015), it is difficult to generalise this particular case to other countries. However, there has been a clear tendency in recent years, in Nordic and many other countries, to shift the focus in upper secondary VETPstowards employability, strongly aligned with labour market demands and at the expense of education for democracy (cf. Jørgensen, 2018; Nylund et al., 2018). Consequently, the students have fewer opportunities to develop critical

thinking and engage with societal and political issues (Ledman et al., 2018; Nylund et al., 2017, 2020; Rosvall et al., 2020; Rönnlund et al., 2019).

The longstanding vocational-academic divide influences perceptions of the nature and role of VET (e.g., Nylund et al., 2018) and its presentation in, for example, policy documents (Nylund et al., 2017). The associated discourses carry presumptions about vocational students (Terning & Tsagalidis, 2020) and reproduce social order and positions (Carlbaum, 2012). Practical knowledge is often regarded as easier to acquire and less 'powerful' than theoretical knowledge in both educational settings and society at large (Carlgren, 2020). Teachers, study and career advisors, and principals, also often reportedly have preconceptions that VET students lack the ability or motivation to tackle theoretical subjects (Johansson, 2009; Olofsson & Panican, 2020), with consequently low expectations for their achievements.

In contrast, VET students have reportedly found teaching of foundational subjects to be too elementary (Korp, 2012; Rosvall, 2012). Students' experiences of foundational subject teaching depend on how teachers transform and realise the curriculum, a process that is strongly conditioned by inner and outer frame factors (cf. Dahllöf, 1999). Thus, these factors warrant attention, but they have been largely neglected. There has also been little investigation of Swedish VET students' own perceptions of citizenship education and their citizen identities. A study by Knekta et al. (forthcoming) found that most Swedish VET students think that citizenship education is important and expect to engage in future elections, but few of them think it is likely that they will express and discuss their opinions in public contexts. These findings indicate that VET students' citizenship education may require strengthening. As a base for that, more knowledge of the possibilities and constraints for teaching VET students and their provision of opportunities to acquire citizenship education is needed.

History, religious education and social studies (e.g., Foster & Crawford, 2006; Englund, 2005; Hartman, 2000; Ledman, 2014; Sigauke, 2013; Thornton, 2017) have long been ascribed important functions in citizenship education, and the importance of science studies for citizenship formation is also increasingly recognised (Evagorou et al., 2020; Hodson, 2003). However, following Yuval-Davies (2011), it is important to recognise that notions of citizenship and individual opportunities for citizenship formation are interrelated with identities formed by power structures. Citizenship education tends to be informed by a traditional conceptualisation of the citizen as white, male and middle class (Arnot, 2009; Yuval-Davies, 2011). This ideal carries norms that have been shown to reduce the visibility of democratic identities and engagement of other social groups (Reay, 2008; Schutz, 2008), but there has been little investigation of the processes involved and their implications. In summary, there are apparent needs for a deeper understanding of the factors that influence citizenship education and

the associated practices and processes, particularly in Swedish VETPs. This study seeks to contribute to such understanding.

## Methodology

This study was part of a collaborative research and development project in which the authors were initially invited to collaborate with teachers who saw a need to find ways to jointly develop citizenship education in Swedish VET settings. The teachers were involved in teaching history, religious education, science, and social studies at two upper secondary schools in one municipality in northern Sweden. In the collaborative process of the project an apparent need was identified to increase knowledge of how conditions constrain teaching and learning in the four subjects in the VETP settings. To elucidate these conditions, we (the authors) interviewed both school leaders and teachers. It should be noted that we do not regard these four subjects as the sole contributors to citizenship education. On the contrary, we believe that citizenship education should permeate education in all subjects.

## Interviews

The two schools were located in a medium-sized town, and they were run by the municipality. One school largely offered VETPs, while the other school only offered two VETPs, the rest being HEPPs. In total, six school leaders and ten teachers who actively taught one or more of the four subjects were interviewed. The teachers involved had pronounced interest in citizenship education and participated in the collaborative developmental project. The school leaders who were interviewed were responsible for different VETPs and therefore of interest for this study.

The interviews with the school leaders were conducted to capture possible variation in their notions of citizenship education, and their views on the organisation and teaching of the four subjects in the VETPs that their schools offered. Due to the pandemic, the school leaders were interviewed via Skype. The interviews were semi-structured (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014), and the questions concerned citizenship education, both generally and specifically regarding needs of their VET students. The school leaders were also asked about their views of the teaching practices in the VETPs for which they were responsible, such as team composition and teacher collaboration. We also posed questions about the general conditions and frames for teaching and factors that influenced the scheduling of subjects and positioning of subjects in different grades. The interviews lasted between 50 and 70 minutes.

The teachers' views were explored through group interviews, which reportedly allow deeper exploration of the discussed issues than interviews with

single individuals, as interactions of the interviewees promote the emergence and exploration of important themes (Wibeck, 2000). The ten teachers were interviewed in three groups of three or four, and encouraged to reflect on their teaching, especially regarding possibilities, constraints, and limitations for learning. Among other matters, they were asked to reflect on potentially relevant organisational aspects, such as the timetabling, sequence of courses, composition of student groups, and the curricular framework. We also invited the teachers to share their experiences and perceptions of others' preconceptions of vocational students, and factors that they thought helped or hindered the students' learning in their subjects. The group interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. All interviews with teachers and school leaders were recorded and transcribed. The teachers and school leaders have been anonymised using numbers to protect their confidentiality. The project received ethical approval from The Swedish Ethical Review Authority (Dnr 2020-01188). The interviews and analysis were done in Swedish, and selected quotes have been translated into English to illustrate the results in this article.

### Theoretical concepts

Teachers work in complex settings with myriads of contextual factors and have equally numerous personal characteristics. Hence, according to a model by Dahllöf (1999), possible teaching and learning achievements in any given setting are conditioned by both external and internal 'frame factors'. *External frame factors* may be related to available teaching time, teaching groups, school premises, policies, and schedules, while *internal frame factors* may include various characteristics of the teachers and school leaders, such as their social backgrounds, identities, and values. Frame factors may also range from micro-scale variables such as specific classroom practices (Lindblad & Sahlström, 1999) to macro-scale variables such as societal structures (Lundgren, 1999). Thus, both macro and micro perspectives may be important when addressing the implementation of educational policies, the knowledge acquisition and learning results that are (and can be) achieved in practical classroom situations, and the frame factors that help or hinder the possibilities (Lindblad et al., 1999; Lindmark, 2013). Frame factor theory is often applied in classroom studies or analyses of teachers' practices, but here we apply it also to school leaders since they are pedagogic leaders and thus responsible for ensuring that students acquire knowledge and skills specified in the curriculum.

Frame factor theory focuses on learning that can be achieved within given frames. Biesta (2009, 2020, 2022) argued that education should be designed to allow students to meet the world, by helping them to become subjects who can influence their own lives and society as it changes. This existential element of education is the core pedagogical task according to Biesta (2020) but is often not

recognised as an important objective in subject teaching or subject didactic research (Jägerskog et al., 2022). Biesta (2020) also identified three key functions of education that cannot be separated as students need to learn about the world and obtain tools required to live in it as it is both now and in the future. Two, *qualification* and *socialisation*, have obvious importance for preparing them to engage in professions and civic society, through acquiring existing knowledge and learning to conform to existing practices and norms (Biesta, 2009). However, practices and norms change, and new knowledge emerges, so students must also learn to participate in a changing world through *subjectification*. Hence, teachers should encourage each student to be a subject in the world, stimulate their desire to be active, and enable them to act or refrain from acting. The goal is for the student to achieve 'qualified freedom', 'in and with the world' (Biesta, 2022, p. 3), through being empowered and enabled to engage with the world. Subjectification does not have predefined goals, and it may even be regarded as conflicting to some degree with goals of qualification and socialisation (Hasslöf & Malmberg, 2015), so achieving an appropriate balance between the three educational functions is not straightforward, but important. Education must also fulfil three criteria to be subjectifying (Biesta, 2022). First, it must be disruptive in the sense of offering a confrontation, *interruption*, between the learner's own perceptions and reality. Second, there must be pauses and time for reflection, *suspension*, in which learners have opportunities to figure out what the interruptions mean for them and to test, fail, and repeat in the learning process. Finally, since confronting gaps between one's own perceptions and realities of the world can be challenging, *sustenance* in the form of support and nourishment from the teacher is needed (Biesta, 2022).

### **Analytical method**

The analytical process included both inductive and deductive approaches (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In a first analytical step, the interviewees' responses were subjected to thematic analysis to identify patterns in them and obtain a rich description of their content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The frame factor theory was then applied in an analysis of what frame factors that were highlighted and whether they were external or internal (cf. Dahllöf, 1999). This meant that we focused attention on variables that the interviewees described as conditioning the teaching and learning process, for example available time, students' knowledge and motivation, group size, and subject content. In a third step we used Biesta's conceptualisations qualification, socialisation, and subjectification (interruption, suspension, sustenance) to identify what functions of education the interviewees made relevant when talking about the conditions for teaching and learning the four subjects and the VET students' citizenship formation. In the following result

section, both frame factor theory and Biesta's concepts are deployed simultaneously.

### School leaders' and teachers' views of VET students' citizenship education

In the result section we here first present the school leaders' expressed views of VET students' citizenship education and then those of the teachers. The views have some similarities, but also some role-related differences.

#### School leaders' views

In the interviews, school leaders highlighted the importance of citizenship education by emphasising several key areas that should be addressed in education. They all expressed beliefs in the importance of fostering democratic values, promoting human rights, and countering prejudice. Some of them expressed beliefs that students need both knowledge and courage to want to act in society. Some also highlighted the importance of general knowledge and that school should provide a common frame of reference. The following quotation illustrates a school leader's recognition of the importance of both general knowledge and the school's mission to shape future citizens:

I think that this is the kind of knowledge that every member of Swedish society should have, some foundations. Everyone should know our history, world history from different perspectives, and have some knowledge of religions and their meanings, both historically and in the present. To have some knowledge of society and how it is structured. Sustainable development-oriented thinking in science studies... We shouldn't just train plumbers, welders or carpenters, we also have a social mission to somehow provide future society with some types of competent citizens. Where do different opinions come from? From different perspectives. (School leader 3)

The quoted school leader clearly regarded 'general' knowledge of various aspects of society as important for qualification, in terms of Biesta's educational functions. The leader also clearly acknowledged the importance of socialisation in the statements that students should have some knowledge of the world and social structures. The last two sentences of the quotation also provide hints of the importance of subjectification, but in terms of the development of 'competent' citizens. This implies that learning about society and how it currently works, in a qualifying manner (cf. Hasslöf & Malmberg, 2015), may be most crucial. The school leader also mentioned the importance of learning about different opinions, different perspectives and their origins, implying that students should have opportunities to confront interruptions of their views of the world. However, the school leader mostly stressed needs for students to 'learn about', rather than learning to actively engage in shaping the world and social structures,



thereby subordinating the subjectifying function of citizenship education to the other functions.

The interviews revealed that there is a belief that it is more challenging to teach vocational students about the four subjects than students of other programmes such as HEPPs, partly because of the heterogeneity of groups taking the various vocational programmes, in terms of both students' backgrounds and motivation. Some of the school leaders also emphasised that many VET students need special education or expressed perceptions that the students are not interested in the four subjects and may even choose not to complete some courses as they can graduate without the associated credits. Overall, school leaders conveyed ideas that the students themselves want to omit some subjects in their education. One school leader highlighted the challenges of VET students' disinterest in the four short courses as follows:

Well... it's a bit different, I'd say. Many students choose a vocational programme because they're interested in practical things and not much of a theoretician. We also see that the theoretical elements in vocational programmes can be difficulties, just like the theoretical elements of other subjects. For the teachers, it's very much about adapting the teaching and making it as practical as possible. It may not be as easy in these fifty-credit courses [...] Students prefer doing things practically and using them in the theoretical aspects, rather than the other way round. (School leader 4)

The school leader here clearly expressed views that students' conceptions of the subjects and their lack of interest in the subjects are fundamental problems in teaching, indicating that the students' lack of motivation is an internal frame factor that teachers should consider. Through the gaze of Biesta's three functions, knowledge in the four subjects is described here as purely theoretical, and as something to be provided, in a qualifying sense. The VET students' socialisation into the teaching practices of the four subjects is described as problematic and foregrounded, while the subjectification function is not articulated at all.

Both the positioning and in between order of the four courses in the programmes are influenced by workplace-learning periods and other subject courses. The school leaders stated that they faced organisational problems and argued that the position and chronological order of the four courses in the vocational programmes were often inherited from previous school leaders. The following quotation illustrates problems that 'inherited' organisation can lead to:

It's something that's been inherited, this is how it has been. I'm not really sure if, how far back, if the teachers have known about it or if it's just [...] Like now, I've been lucky enough to have a teacher who has had social studies [course] 1a:1 and social 1a:2 in the Child and Recreation programme for two years in a row, and he has got to know both how the programme works and the other teachers, who teach other subjects, and has been curious to find out for himself: what do you work on in your courses, is there something we can do together? I think it's a great advantage that the same teachers come back when you want to build on such things. (School leader 2)

We interpret the inherited organisation emphasised by this school leader as an external frame factor that was considered unfortunate, and the mentioned teacher's commitment and interest in overcoming the organisational problems as highly advantageous internal frame factors. Thus, the school leader allocated much of the responsibility for the students' success to the teacher, at least in this case.

Furthermore, some school leaders noted that external conditions, such as financial constraints, result in large teaching groups, with students enrolled in different programmes studying together. Recruiting separate teachers for the courses of each of these programmes would be too costly, as there are generally too few students, according to the school leaders.

Another organisational problem identified from the school leaders' statements is that the history, religious education, science and social studies teachers often make short-term contributions to the vocational programmes because they are not regular members of VETP teacher teams. Instead, they are often members of teams that are generally engaged in HEPPs, such as the social sciences or natural sciences programmes. They are described as 'satellite teachers' who are not evenly distributed across the teams. The school leaders highlighted these teachers' limited involvement in VETPs and greater engagement in other programmes. Thus, the individual teachers' engagement was a significant internal frame factor.

School leaders also stressed that VET students would benefit from more student-centred pedagogy. However, this is challenging because the courses are short, they must be taught in large groups, and the subject teachers need to teach many groups to fulfil full-time teaching requirements. This fact, that the teachers must engage and try to establish relationships with numerous students of many heterogeneous classes is seen as an unfortunate external frame factor.

To summarise, the analysis of the interviews with the school leaders indicates that they tend to see qualification as the main mission of history, religious education, science studies, and social studies courses for VET students. However, the overall goal of the VET programmes is seen as socialisation into the vocations and professions that lie ahead of the students. The subjectifying functions of the subjects are thus subordinate. Theory and practice are also constructed as opposites in the school leaders' discourse, so the four subjects are seen as solely theoretical. This is not surprising given the traditional academic-vocational divide, associated assumptions regarding the subjects, and corresponding overall organisation of the schools. The school leaders recognised that external frame factors affect teaching, but largely attributed the deficiencies in citizenship education to internal frame factors, especially characteristics of the teachers and their teaching, together with the students' disinterest and unwillingness to learn the subjects.

### Teachers' perspectives

The teachers particularly emphasised the importance of external frame factors. They expressed beliefs that the organisation of the teaching often posed obstacles, for example, their courses are often placed at times in the schedule when the students' energy is running out. The teachers also argued that it is difficult to collaborate across subjects in the current organisation, because of a variation of where the courses are positioned in the three-year VETPs. For example, in the same vocational programme, social studies courses may be placed in year one and history in year two, making cross-curricular teaching of social studies and history impossible. The following quotation describes the alienation that these subject teachers may experience in the VETPs:

At the school, no foundational subject's teacher in these subjects is a member of the Child and Recreation programme teacher team. Therefore, there is no feeling of teaching together with other teachers. One doesn't have time to attend other team meetings and misses out on what is happening in the programme. I'm an 'outsourced teacher' and sometimes find out things at the last minute, for example, about schedule changes, [...] or project work week that I haven't been informed about. One is forgotten because one is not part of the team. (Teacher 5)

The teacher here describes herself as a satellite teacher and that the organisation of teaching also implies a sense of subordination to other subjects and teachers, especially vocational subjects. This feeling is reinforced by teachers' perceptions that the students have little interest in history, religious education, science, and social studies:

All [students] talk about Swedish, English and maths because you have to pass them. In our programme at least, you don't pass if you don't take any of those [courses]. Then there's the fact that they usually prioritise the programme-specific subjects, that's what they've aimed for when they chose our programme. So sure, maybe our subjects end up last, but it doesn't feel like they're losing status, I still think it feels like it's important that we spend time on them. (Teacher 2)

This teacher clearly believed that students prioritise their vocational subjects, sometimes to the detriment of other subjects, especially the interviewed teacher's subjects, because the students focus on passing courses in subjects that are essential for graduation. However, the quotation also suggests that the students still consider the four subjects to be important. Thus, the problem may be due to external frame factors, such as the lack of requirement for the students to pass the courses to obtain their vocational qualifications, rather than students' lack of interest in the subjects.

An insight that emerged from the interviews is that the workplace-learning periods in the various programmes are placed so that the opportunities to acquire in-depth knowledge in the four subjects are reduced. For example, a period of workplace learning may interrupt the teaching of part of a social studies course,

which raises difficulties for both the teacher and students, as illustrated by this quotation:

They don't really lose just five weeks, because in the week before they go on workplace-learning you can't start anything. Now I've finished a section until the autumn holidays, and they've done tests and so on, but they haven't finished before the workplace-learning period, so that week is almost lost. One can't ... what should you start with? When they come back for just two weeks before Christmas. It feels like a lot of time just disappears. (Teacher 5)

The teacher here refers to the organisation as a problem for teaching and students' knowledge acquisition. External frame factors such as the positioning of workplace-learning and its interruption of the courses have a negative impact. The teacher needs to plan carefully to be able to finish the modules and carry out tests. This is a consequence of the subjects' subordination to other content in the programme that clearly provides vocational qualification. However, the interviewed teachers emphasise the qualifying and socialising functions of their own subjects. This can be seen in the talk of tests and their needs to teach in ways that easily can assess measurable knowledge and the need for working with modules, or predefined teaching material that must be processed appropriately, rather than creating more open learning opportunities where the students can explore their own relation to the subject.

The teachers think that the fact that their teaching groups usually consist of students from different vocational programmes, so-called joint classes, can be a major pedagogical obstacle. In practice, this means large groups of students that also change in composition over time. This makes it more difficult to create a classroom climate in which the students can be at ease. It also complicates attempts to link subject matter to the future professions of the students, for example, linking students' experiences of, and interests in, hairdressing or construction to the content of social studies courses. The advantage of stable groups over time and the difficulties associated with joint classes for students of multiple programmes is highlighted by the following teacher:

And they know each other since they've had all of these courses together. They have Swedish together in year one, so we've had them in the same group there. But [...] when the budget governs the decisions, on some occasions the Technical [programme students] must be with Restaurant [Food and Management programme students] and so on. And that has not turned out well. (Teacher 1)

The formation of joint classes seems to be entirely due to effects of external frame factors. Yet, the participating teachers recognised that building stable relationships and continuity are highly important for successful teaching. According to their experiences, students need relational pedagogy and a safe classroom environment to learn their subjects. The content of the subjects must be processed through dialogue both between students and between students and teachers.

Having discussions, trying out ideas and practising taking a stand are considered as important elements of the subjects. The teachers express that limitations of available time make it difficult to develop relationships, especially in large groups. This problem is also often exacerbated by the fact that the teachers need to teach several of these short courses, and hence numerous students:

Then there's also ... I feel that when I started a few years ago, I had seven religion courses at the same time in parallel. It's completely hopeless. If you have 50 credit courses, you shouldn't have so many. Then I think you burn yourself out pretty quickly. It worked when I was fifteen years younger, but now I don't think I could cope with having seven groups at the same time. (Teacher 3)

The experience described by the teacher in this quotation is common. A consequence of the multitude of relationships is that teachers require a lot of extra commitment to get to know all the students, and it is difficult to find time to help everyone. Time and opportunity for building relationships between the students and between the teacher and students would also increase possibilities for subjectification, since the teachers would have more chances to identify the *interruption* needs of individual learners and help them to actively invest in the learning by being 'in and with the world' (Biesta, 2022). This is hindered by the conditions, as emphasised in this quote:

Yes, but it's a lot about not knowing each other, I think, and that can lead to underperformance, they don't dare to say, they don't dare to speak up. And that can inhibit the group dynamics above all. (Teacher 4)

Under current conditions, with the identified external frame factors, it is difficult for the students to make own meaning of the knowledge conveyed in the four courses. There is no time to suspension, that is, pausing to try out and deepen the students' knowledge, and little opportunity for teachers to provide sustenance, that is, supporting each student in their individual point of process (cf. Biesta, 2022).

To summarise the teachers' views, the teachers clearly regarded external frame factors as major obstacles to their teaching, including organisational constraints (necessitated by financial restraints) such as the limited available time for the courses, their position in the schedule and in relation to workplace learning, group sizes, and joint classes. In practice, these frame factors collectively result in subordination of the four subjects. The teachers stress the need for relationship building and relational teaching when teaching VETP students in their subjects. Although this can be interpreted as the teachers wanting to make room for subjectification in their teaching, the prevailing logic underpinning their views of their subjects and the students appear to implicitly regard the students' qualification and socialisation into the existing social order as the most important educational functions. When talking about their subjects and the conditions for

teaching, the primary focus for the teachers seems to be to transfer general and decontextualised subject knowledge and norms to their students, rather than enabling and empowering them to apply the acquired knowledge in subjectification and development of their citizenship.

### Concluding discussion

As anticipated, we detected role-related differences in school leaders' and teachers' perceptions of the possibilities and constraints in teaching and learning in the four focal subjects, as well as their views on the citizenship education provided by the courses and the emphasised educational functions.

School leaders noted that the VET programmes' structure was largely inherited, making changes difficult due to scheduling and financial constraints. They believed VET students primarily need qualification and socialisation and saw value in citizenship education but faced obstacles such as students' lack of interest or ability to assimilate these subjects, which according to Knekta et al. (forthcoming) is in contrast with students' own views. The school leaders found it more challenging to provide citizenship education to VETP students compared to HEPP students and identified a lack of cooperation among teachers across subject boundaries and insufficient adaptation of teaching methods to VET students' motivations and abilities. They perceived individual teachers' reluctance to integrate vocational aspects into their subjects as a major constraint and an internal frame factor.

In contrast, teachers emphasised external factors like time, scheduling, group composition, and group size as obstacles to subject development, believing these issues could be resolved with more thoughtful organisation. They felt budgetary considerations often outweighed pedagogical ones in school leaders' decisions, leading to the concerns of the teachers being overlooked. Teachers viewed workplace-learning periods as limiting due to the breaks they caused in courses and did not see workplace-learning as part of citizenship education, missing opportunities for collaboration with vocational teachers and workplace staff. They also highlighted problems with joint classes, arguing that they hinder trustful relationships due to large, changing groups, and did not consider the potential benefits of joint classes, such as opportunities for subjectification through interactions with diverse students (cf. Biesta, 2022).

Teachers and school leaders shared some common perceptions of vocational students as disinterested in the four subjects and perhaps not well prepared for learning them. If we apply Biesta's concepts to this, qualification and socialisation dominates both teachers' and school leaders' statements in how they express their views of the VET students and what the students need to know and what kind of person they should learn to be to become employable (cf. Terning &

Tsagalidis, 2020). Subjectification thus becomes invisible in the talk about the students, and their education appears rather instrumental. If subjectification is viewed through the lens of qualification and socialisation in this way, one might ask if subjectification might happen at all (cf. Hasslöf & Malmberg, 2015). Also, the talk about the VET students is to a large extent focussed on their 'becoming' future employees or citizens (cf. Colley et al., 2004). This is in stark contrast to subjectification, which is not a process of becoming, but is happening here and now (Biesta, 2020).

Biesta (2016) believes that the increased pressure on today's teachers to create effective and instrumental teaching that produces measurable results in our goal-related school system both marginalises the teacher's role and alienates the student from the world (cf. Ball, 2014). Challenging structures and making changes to create more favourable conditions for students is required if citizenship education is to be strengthened. The school leaders' comments particularly suggest that citizenship education is subordinated to VET subjects, and that perceptions of VET students as practitioners rather than theorists negatively affect the expectations placed on them and the conditions for teaching. Above all, the results show that there are organisational difficulties that affect the teaching in these four subjects and, in extension, the opportunities for vocational students' citizenship formation in terms of pedagogic rights (Bernstein, 2000). It is not only a question of what the teachers teach, but also of how the teaching provides opportunities for the students to gain an understanding of other people's perspectives, to build self-confidence to dare to express opinions and to develop action competence. The subjects require students to actively practice and apply the knowledge covered to make it 'their own'. Thus, citizenship education requires not only exposure to knowledge 'about', but also acquisition of knowledge through individuals' experiences of doing and being. This is strongly aligned with Biesta's view of subjectification, as a process in which the individual meets the world and develops uniqueness (cf. Jägerskog et al., 2022), with needs for opportunities for reality-checks, enough time for processing, and both support and patience from the teacher (Biesta, 2022).

A major problem is that the strong emphasis on educating VET students for their future professional and civic roles leaves little room for empowering them as subjects and enabling development of their citizenship in the here and now. The instrumental view of knowledge and the construction of VET students as unmotivated practitioners with limited abilities to learn theoretical subjects, and not yet fully developed citizens, underpin the conditions for the teaching and learning in the subjects. This is the main issue that must be addressed, since these views do not correspond with VET students' own images of themselves (Knekta et al., forthcoming) or support the process of empowering young people to engage with the world as subjects (cf. Biesta, 2022).

## Concluding remarks

History, religious education, science, and social studies courses for Swedish vocational students are at the intersection of two hierarchical orders. They are not only subordinated to vocational subjects in the VET programmes, but also subordinated within each subject, as teachers of the subjects value (and prioritise) courses in the vocational programmes less highly than courses of the higher education preparation programmes. Thus, the courses are positioned at the lower end of two hierarchical orders, and courses for vocational students can be said to be undervalued by school leaders as well as the subject teachers. In overall conclusion, awareness of these arrangements and perceptions, together with a change of perspective, are needed to bring about change and improve the citizenship education of Swedish VET students.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Foundational subjects are included in all upper secondary study programmes. They include history, science, religious education, and social studies (50 credits each, which represents approximately 40–50 teaching hours), as well as Swedish, English, mathematics and physical education & health (100 credits each). For full upper secondary attainment 2800 credits are required, but 2500 are sufficient for graduation, so VET students can fail (or ignore) courses worth up to 300 credits.

## Funding

The study was supported by the ULF Agreement: Education and Research in Collaboration between Academia and the School System, at Umeå School of Education, Umeå University.

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