



Transition from school-based to workplace-based training: Student, teacher, and trainer perceptions of the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training

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Abstract

This article examines students' transition from school-based training to workplace-based training in vocational education and training (VET). We analyse how students' experiences of this transition are shaped by perceptions of the relationship between school-based and workplace-based training among the students themselves and their teachers and workplace trainers. The theoretical framework includes the concepts of narrative, repertoire, and horizon. The empirical material consists of interviews with students, their teachers, and workplace trainers. The analysis identifies two student narratives during school-based training: 'I want to use the knowledge I have acquired at school during workplace-based training' and 'I want to put school behind me'. During workplace-based training, these are mirrored by two narratives in which school-based training becomes either more or less meaningful. Two teachers' positions and two workplace trainer positions are also constructed, reflecting divergent views on the relevance of school-based education and training. By juxtaposing student narratives with teacher and trainer positions, the analysis highlights conditions shaping either smooth or more disjointed transitions. By examining how students' narratives are shaped through encounters with teachers' and trainers' positions, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of meaning-making processes in transitions between school-based and workplace-based training in VET.

Keywords: transition, interrelation, school-based training, workplace-based training, student, teachers, trainers



Introduction

The transition from school-based education and training to workplace-based training and the interrelation of the two learning contexts is a recurrent theme within research on vocational education and training (VET) (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Enochsson & Kilbrink, 2025; Johannesen et al., 2022; Louw & Katznelson, 2019). These studies have mainly focused on whether students perceive a clear interrelation between what they learn at school and in the workplace, but without exploring how they make sense of this interrelation (Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2022). Furthermore, there is scant research concerning transitions embedded within dual VET systems, particularly the transition from school to the first period of workplace-based training.

This article concerns VET students' transition from school-based training to the first period of workplace-based training in VET. Inspired by Ulriksen et al. (2019) and based on interviews with students both at school and in the workplace-based training, we identify students' narratives about the interrelation of school-based education and training and workplace-based training during their transition from school-based education and training to the first period of workplace-based training. Furthermore, we examine how teachers' and trainers' perceptions of this interrelation can shape their students' narratives.

The study presented here was motivated by the fact that a substantial share of the relatively high dropout rates in Danish VET – 36% across programmes (Schoop et al., 2023) – occurs during the transition to the first period of workplace-based training, accounting for around 60% of all dropouts (Aarkrog & Kamstrup, 2023; Erhvervsskoler og Gymnasier, 2023). The study therefore aims to inform and inspire efforts to strengthen this transition and, consequently, reduce dropout.

Vocational education and training (VET) in Denmark is characterised by a dual system in which students alternate between school-based education and training and workplace-based training. Workplace-based training takes place in a variety of settings, including private companies and public-sector organisations. A typical VET programme begins with a 20-week basic course at a vocational college, after which students enter the main programme, in which they alternate between periods at school and periods in workplace-based training, with the structure and duration varying across programmes. Each period of workplace-based training typically lasts six months or longer.

Research on the transition from school-based to workplace-based training

A number of studies have explored the transition from school-based to workplace-based training through the concept of boundary crossing (Akkerman

& Bakker, 2011; Berner, 2010; Tanggaard, 2007), employing boundary objects to support the students' transition (Enochsson & Kilbrink, 2025; Nore, 2015; Riis, 2023). In a literature review, Akkerman and Bakker argued that boundary crossing involves sociocultural differences that lead to discontinuities in actions and interactions (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). However, they also argued that this discontinuity encompasses a learning potential. Thus, the reviewed literature points to four mechanisms that can support learning during boundary crossing: *Identification* of differences between the practices, conceptualised as either 'othering' or legitimising the coexistence of two practices; *coordination*, which includes communicative connections between the practices, translation efforts, enhancing boundary permeability, and routinisation; *reflection* on similarities and differences between practices, including taking each other's perspective; and *transformation* that leads to profound changes in practice or to the establishment of a new in-between practice, sometimes conceptualised as boundary practices (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, pp. 142–146). In our study we have focused on identifying differences not between practices, but among students, teachers, and trainers.

Boundary crossing can involve negotiating a new identity in new communities of practice, crossing from the familiar school to the unknown workplace, (Tanggaard, 2007). The change of identity often concerns the shift from student to worker (Brockmann & Laurie, 2016). For students who have had negative learning experiences at school, becoming an apprentice in a workplace can offer a new, more positive learner identity (Hegna, 2019) in which the students can experience success, mastery, and a sense of belonging (Tårnesvik & Schmid, 2022). Thus, students often perceive the shift to a workplace identity as a positive development.

The crossing or transition is perceived as a process that needs preparation and guidance. One way of preparing the students is to acquaint them with the world of work before they begin workplace-based training. Early acquaintance with the workplace does not only serve as preparation for workplace-based training but has also beneficial impact on retention (Schoop et al., 2023, p. 53) and on the students' motivation for school-based training (Baartman et al., 2018; Berner, 2010). Another way of preparing for and supporting the transition is to involve the use of boundary objects with guidance by teachers that can help the student relate their experiences in the workplace to the school-based training (Utvær & Saur, 2019; Øgård & Hillen, 2025). Finally, the transition can be supported by combining practical training with systematic reflection in the classroom on what the students have learnt (Johannesen et al., 2022; Schaap et al., 2012). As such, reflection is central in supporting students' transition to workplace-based training.

Summing up, previous research often perceives the transition from the school's point of view. The transition to workplace-based training is conceptualised as boundary crossing – as a process that can be smooth but also discontinuous and disjointed encompassing a learning potential and identity change. The students' transition can be supported in various ways, including encountering practice in the workplace at an early stage in their education, employing boundary objects, and combining practical training with systematic reflection. Finally, there is a need for reflective dialogue between teachers and students, for example about differences between school-based and workplace-based training.

Research on the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training

Students' perceptions of the interrelation of school-based education and training and workplace-based training is a recurrent theme in VET research, with students often struggling to understand the interrelation and the relevance of theory (Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2022). This has led to research on how to improve the students' perception of coherence.

Most of the studies focuses on the interrelation from a school perspective. As was the case in research concerning transition, research on the interrelation shows that it enhances students' perception of coherence between school-based and workplace-based training if the former training includes authentic tasks and situations (Aakernes, 2018; Boersma et al., 2016; Choo, 2007). Short periods of practical training in real workplaces strengthen such perceptions of coherence and motivate students to learn theoretical knowledge (Armatas & Papadopoulos, 2013). In relation to these short periods of training, teachers should visit students in the various workplaces and the workplace trainers, or supervisors, should support students' learning processes (Larsen & Schmid, 2025; Mårtensson, 2021).

Some research focuses on the interrelation from a workplace perspective: Establishing a workplace-based training curriculum that integrates school-based training in the performance of tasks in the workplace has been shown to have a positive impact on students' perceptions of coherence (Bisgaard, 2018; Fjellström & Kristmansson, 2019; Onstenk & Blokhuis, 2007). Release days – meaning that students in workplace-based training return to school for a couple of days – contributes to a perception of continuity between school and work among students (Akkerman & Bakker, 2012). More generally to enhance the interrelation, there is a need for developing workplace trainers' pedagogical competences (Doroftei et al., 2018).

When theory and practice are integrated both at school and in the workplace, thus avoiding the so-called theory-practice gap, this supports perceptions of

coherence among students (Kilbrink, 2013; Louw, 2017; Louw & Katznelson, 2019; Luthi et al., 2021; Sappa et al., 2018; Sauli, 2021). Consequently, research points to the importance of teachers and trainers working together to establish activities that support students' ability to perceive an interrelation between school and workplace (Louw, 2017; Louw & Katznelson, 2019), leading to a need to clarify the responsibility for establishing coherence among students, teachers, and trainers (Wesselink et al., 2010).

Summing up, research on the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training does not question the importance of a strong interrelation. The studies instead highlight students' difficulties in perceiving such an interrelation and point to various factors that can support a greater sense of coherence. These factors include early exposure to training experiences in the workplaces, developing a workplace-based curriculum, and closer cooperation between teachers and trainers.

Related to previous research, the aim of this study was to learn about how students' experiences of the transition to the first period of workplace-based training is shaped by students', teachers', and trainers' perceptions regarding the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training. We have focused on the students' narratives concerning the two learning contexts and the transition between them, including following the students both at school and in the workplaces. This transition is a process during which the students form and adjust narratives about issues such as the change in community of practice, identity formation, and the interrelation of school-based and work-based training. In this article, the focus is on the latter and the students' meaning-making processes concerning this interrelation. Meaning-making refers to how the students make sense of the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training. Previous research points to several factors that influence the students' meaning making in the transition, particularly highlighting the roles of the teachers and trainers. Thus, to better understand students' narratives, the teachers' and trainers' positions have been examined regarding the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training. The article explores the following research questions:

- Which narratives do the students construct to make sense of the transition between school and workplace?
- Which teacher and trainer positions do the students encounter at school and in the workplace, and how do these positions influence their narratives?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that has inspired the analysis and discussion in this article includes concepts for understanding transition processes.

In research on educational transitions and on life transitions in general, transition is characterised as a process where individuals continuously negotiate meaning (Aakernes, 2018; Ulriksen et al., 2013). This article draws on a narrative and social-constructivist approach to educational transitions, inspired by Ulriksen et al. (2019), to analyse how students make sense of the transition from school-based to workplace-based training in vocational education. Central to this framework are the concepts of narrative, repertoire, and horizon, which together capture both the processual and contextual dimensions of meaning-making across transitions.

Narratives are understood as the ways in which individuals construct meaning by linking past experiences, present situations, and anticipated futures into coherent accounts (Bruner, 1990). In the context of educational transitions, narratives are ongoing, processual constructions through which students make sense of who they are, what they are learning, and where they are heading (Ulriksen et al., 2013, 2019). As such, narratives constitute students' meaning making in transitions. At the same time, they are socially shaped, as they draw on meanings, expectations, and distinctions available within educational and workplace contexts, and constructed in the interplay between students' horizons and repertoires.

The concept of horizon is used to capture how students orient themselves towards imagined futures and anticipated forms of participation (Ulriksen et al., 2019). Horizons refer to what students perceive as possible, desirable, or realistic in relation to their education and future job. Importantly, horizons are not individual aspirations detached from context, but socially shaped expectations informed by prior experiences and current institutional encounters.

Repertoire refers to the experiences and knowledge students bring with them when entering a new educational context. The concept sheds light on the students' accumulated understandings of what it means to participate as a student: how to prepare for transitions, how to engage in teaching activities, how to interpret expectations, and how to act appropriately in different situations (Ulriksen et al., 2019). Importantly, a student's repertoire also conditions their horizons, as it influences what futures they can imagine, and how they interpret the relationship between current learning activities and future participation in work or further education.

These concepts draw on cognitive psychology and narrative theory (Bruner, 1990, 2004) and were used by Ulriksen et al. (2019) in a different (non-vocational) educational context. Transferring them to the transitions in vocational education allows us to create new insights into students' meaning-making processes during

this transition, enabling us to point out what creates continuities and discontinuities.

Empirical study

The article is based on a qualitative study exploring students', teachers', and trainers' thoughts regarding the transition from school-based education and training to the first period of workplace-based training. Thus, the study does not seek to identify causalities between students' perceptions and teachers' and trainers' ideas about supporting the transition, but rather to present the voices of individuals, which can then be juxtaposed in various scenarios.

The empirical data included interviews with students, teachers, and trainers in five VET programmes at five VET schools. The criteria for selecting the five VET programmes were a relatively high dropout rate in the transition to the first period of workplace-based training and a relatively large number of students. The selected programmes were dental assistant, farming, gastronomy, pedagogical assistant, and social and health care assistant.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point and about anonymity in the transcription and analysis of data and the presentation of results. None of the informants withdrew their consent. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Below, we outline the methodology in relation to our focus in this article. For a description of the method for the entire project, please see Kamstrup and Aarkrog (2024).

Interviews with students

Two rounds of interviews were conducted with participating students: focus group interviews took place at school as the students approached the transition to workplace-based training; individual interviews took place at workplaces shortly after the students had begun workplace-based training.

At each of the five schools, one *focus group interview* was conducted with five–six students; a total of 27 students participated. Teachers were asked to select students that represented the diversity of the class in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and practical experience within the industry or trade. The interviews lasted 60–90 minutes. The focus group interview method concentrates on how the informants construct knowledge through dialogue and discussion (Halkier, 2010). The interviews centred on the students' thoughts and expectations regarding their upcoming workplace-based training.

As many students as possible from each focus group interview took part in 30-minute individual interviews at the workplaces (a total of 18 students) in order to capture the transition from both sides of the boundary between school-based

and workplace-based training. The interviews were conducted after the students had been in workplace-based training for approximately one month. This timing was chosen to ensure proximity to the transition while also allowing the students to have gained sufficient experience in the workplace. A semi-structured interview guide included two themes. The first theme concerned the individual student's experiences of the onboarding process and of performing various tasks, as well as participating in the social and collegial community. The second theme concerned the student's reflections when comparing their expectations in the first interview at school to their experiences in the workplace. For this theme, the student was presented with relevant examples of their contributions during the focus group interviews.

Interviews with teachers

One focus group interview was conducted at each of the five schools with a group of three teachers (at one school, only two teachers participated). The criterion for selecting the teachers was that they taught a relatively large number of lessons in the class and/or played an active role in preparing the students for the transition to workplace-based training.

These semi-structured interviews lasted for approximately one hour and explored two main themes. The first theme asked teachers to finish the following sentence: 'An education and training activity is meaningful when...' on a piece of paper, before presenting and discussing their answers. The second theme concerned how their school prepared students for the transition to workplace-based training.

Interviews with workplace trainers

At each of the 18 workplaces (in one of the VET programmes only two workplaces wanted to participate) one interview was conducted with the students' primary trainer. A semi-structured interview guide included two main themes: 1) onboarding of students, including contact with the school and day-to-day supervision, and 2) preparing the student for the next period of school-based training, including the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training. The interviews lasted around 30 minutes.

In this article, the analysis only includes the students' teachers', and trainers' reflections on the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training. Their perspectives on other aspects of the transition are presented in Kamstrup and Aarkrog (2024).

Analysis of interviews

The research aim was to generate knowledge about how students experience the transition from school-based to workplace-based training. A further aim was to

explore what contributes to students' experiences of this transition as meaningful. Accordingly, the analysis focused on linking students' expectations during school-based training with their subsequent experiences of workplace-based training.

The data were coded as a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) with attention to cross-cutting themes that emerged when students were asked about their expectations of and experiences during the transition. The coding process was iterative, moving back and forth between the empirical material and emerging analytical themes, allowing the analysis to be progressively refined. This approach made it possible to identify recurring themes concerning how students imagined using what they had learned at school in workplace-based training, and how they later experienced being able – or unable – to draw on school-based education and training once in the workplace.

In addition, themes related to, for example, social communities across school and workplace-based training and students' first days in the workplace emerged from the material. However, these themes are not addressed in the present article. Based on the identified cross-cutting themes, it was analytically possible to construct narratives about the relationship between learning in school-based and workplace-based training. These narratives should be understood as analytical constructions that capture recurring patterns across interviews rather than as accounts by individual students. Although the narratives are analytical constructions, they are grounded in recurring patterns identified across students from different VET programmes and educational contexts, indicating that they capture shared ways of making sense of the transition rather than isolated individual accounts.

In the analysis of the interviews with teachers and trainers, the focus was on constructing positions regarding how they sought to link theoretical knowledge at school and practice in the workplace, thereby creating an interrelation that they believed would support the students' transition. The aim has been to show the breadth and diversity as well as the similarities regarding teachers' and trainers' perceptions. We use the term 'position' to describe the ways in which teachers and workplace trainers articulate particular understandings of the relationship between school-based and workplace-based training. Positions refer to relatively stable perceptions that teachers and trainers adopt when talking about how training should occur and the purposes that training at school and in the workplace are expected to serve. While these positions, in practice, are also dynamic and open to change, the analysis treats them as analytically 'fixed' to foreground how they shape the context and repertoires available to students during their transition. The following presentation of findings seeks to answer the two research questions above.

Students' narratives in the transition between school-based and workplace-based training

The analysis of the students' narratives concerning the transition is structured around two points in time: while students are still at school, anticipating the transition to workplace training, and once they have entered the workplace and begun participating in everyday practice within this setting. While at school, students construct narratives that either emphasise the anticipated relevance of school-based education and training or express frustration and disengagement from the academic expectations at school. Once in workplace training, they again construct two contrasting narratives: one in which school knowledge is retrospectively affirmed as meaningful and supportive of their participation, and another in which school-based education and training is rejected as redundant or misaligned with the realities of practice. In the following we will present these narratives using the concepts of horizon and repertoire (Ulriksen et al, 2019). The excerpts presented below are selected as particularly clear illustrations of the identified narratives; however, the narratives themselves are constructed across interviews with students from all five VET programmes.

At school

This section explores the narratives that students construct during their time at school. Two narratives can be identified through which students make sense of their transition from school-based to workplace-based training.

I want to use the knowledge I have acquired at school during workplace-based training

The first narrative concerns students' anticipation of how they can use knowledge from school in the workplace. They interpret their present experiences – and knowledge from lessons – through expectations about what lies ahead. Students describe the school as a space where they acquire a repertoire of knowledge and skills that they look forward to 'trying out' in the workplace. The narrative is illustrated by the following quote:

We have just learned about cattle diseases, and I expect this knowledge will be useful in spotting disease among cattle, rather than being unable to spot the disease because we have not been taught about it. (student, farming)

This student emphasises that the content of a recent lesson at school will enable them to carry out specific tasks they already imagine performing during their workplace training. Another student expresses a similar point at a slightly more general level where school seems to prepare the students for the imagined 'real world':

I have equipped myself with something [theory] that I will actually have the opportunity to go out [into practice] and try out on real people (student, social and health care)

These quotes illustrate a narrative where school-based training is understood as relevant in preparing for the transition to workplace-based training, with the students casting themselves as emerging professionals who are gradually building the competences necessary for full participation in practice. Thereby, the narrative links the repertoire developed in school to a horizon here imagined as a future professional identity. In this way, it functions as what Ulriksen et al. (2019) describe as a meaning-making narrative, bridging past learning, present engagement, and anticipated future practice. School-based training is therefore not only legitimate but provides the foundation for students' imagined participation in workplace training.

I want to leave school behind

While at school, a second narrative is constructed amongst the students. This narrative differs from the first by portraying education and training at school as less significant. It illustrates how students make sense of their present experiences in school by looking forward to other training opportunities at the workplace. In this narrative, students frame their struggle with academic demands at school as something that will no longer constrain them once they enter the workplace. Real-world and experience-based knowledge is superior to academic learning:

I would rather learn in real life than academically. You know, trying it out makes sense instead of just reading how it should be in a book. It is much more fun to try mixing something [forage], realising that it actually makes a difference instead... I mean, you do not know whether it works just because it says so in a book. (student, farming)

The students often describe the theoretical parts of their education as abstract, difficult, or disconnected from practice, and envisage the workplace as a context where practical training dominates and where they will be able to draw on their perceived practical strengths:

If you just have a really good grasp of your theory and know it inside out, that does not necessarily mean that you'll be a good social and health care assistant, whereas someone who maybe finds all the theory stuff more of a struggle may become the best social and health care assistant. I mean, you maybe shouldn't always follow the textbooks, do things just because they say so: look at the person instead of the book. (student, social and health care)

This narrative mobilises a particular horizon in which school-based theory becomes unnecessary or marginal. In Ulriksen et al.'s terms (2019), students use their upcoming transition to reinterpret their current difficulties through a narrative that maintains a positive sense of self and preserves motivation. This

narrative thus makes sense of a problematic present and offers a more manageable future, even though it rests on an assumed discontinuity between school-based and workplace-based training.

Together, these two narratives show how the students make sense of their transition by relating their present experiences to an expected future. However, they differ in how they configure the relationship between school-based and workplace-based training. The first narrative constructs continuity, drawing on a repertoire formed in school and projecting it onto a future horizon where it is expected to be relevant and useful. The second narrative constructs discontinuity, narratively downplaying the value of theoretical knowledge and elevating an imagined future where practical training dominates.

In the workplace

Just as in school, two contrasting narratives also emerge when students have entered workplace training. These narratives illustrate how the students retrospectively mobilise – or distance themselves from – the learning acquired at school in order to make sense of the present. At the same time, the narratives also reveal how students negotiate their professional identity and legitimacy as newcomers to the workplace.

School becomes meaningful

In the first narrative, school is perceived as meaningful. Students emphasise that the knowledge and skills acquired at school enable them to participate productively in workplace tasks. They describe being able to draw on school-based learning to understand procedures, solve problems, or contribute to the workflow in ways that support their emerging legitimacy as practitioners. This narrative is illustrated by the following quote:

Without a doubt, I can use what I learnt at school, all the stuff about cattle diseases [...] Some evenings, I have looked at my assignments from school and thought, yes okay, that was it... (student, farming)

This quote shows how the present is constructed as intelligible through the students' repertoires – here seen as selective activation of past experiences (Ulriksen et al., 2019). The students' experiences at school become part of the repertoire they use to make sense of the demands and expectations they encounter in the workplace. In this way, the school is retrospectively positioned as meaningful: as a resource that supports task performance, identity formation, and the student's sense of belonging. The same is expressed by another student:

They stay somewhere in the back of my mind, these concepts we have brought with us from school. They do not really take up much space in everyday practice... They tend to come up when we sit in meetings and discuss assignments. Then I suddenly

realise: 'Oh yes, this is actually exactly what we talked about in school' – and that is when the connection is made. (student, pedagogical assistant)

When talking to colleagues at the workplace, this student realises how concepts learned at school are useful for understanding practical assignments. The student creates a narrative in which school-based education and training is not only relevant but also foundational for becoming a legitimate participant in the workplace community of practice. The transition is therefore narrated as coherent and continuous rather than disruptive.

School becomes meaningless

In contrast to the first narrative, the second narrative depicts school-based education and training as irrelevant or redundant. Students describe the tasks they are expected to perform in the workplace as differing markedly from what they learned at school, or how their trainer in the workplace 'explains everything again' in ways that make school instruction appear unnecessary. This narrative is illustrated in the following:

When you start training [as an apprentice], not knowing how much you know [from school], they just tell you the whole thing again [...] I do not think that the school can teach me anything that the clinic does not teach me or that I cannot read in a book. (student, dental assistant)

Here, school is perceived as unhelpful or misguided preparation for the realities of practice. Students do not draw on their school experiences in the present (Ulriksen et al., 2019). Instead, they emphasise that understanding arises in practice rather than through what they have learned at school.

In this narrative, workplace-based training is framed as the preferred mode of becoming a practitioner. The transition is interpreted as correcting the mismatch between school and 'real' work, thereby reinforcing a perception that meaningful training only occurs through hands-on participation.

Taken together, the two narratives demonstrate meaning making in the interrelation between school and workplace: students mobilise the past (school) in different ways to understand the present (workplace), thereby shaping how the transition is experienced.

Teachers' and workplace trainers' positions regarding the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training

In this part of the analysis, we focus on the positions of teachers and workplace trainers regarding the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training. As mentioned above, we use the term 'position' to describe the ways in which teachers and workplace trainers articulate particular understandings of

the relationship between school-based education and training and workplace-based training. Teachers and workplace trainers play a central role in framing the intended purposes of school-based training and how theory and practice are expected to connect. In other words, they provide some of the repertoires (Ulriksen et al., 2019) that students may draw upon when constructing narratives about the transition.

Positions that students encounter at school

Based on the interviews with teachers, two positions have been constructed depicting how the teachers perceive the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training: 'the role of the school is to teach students a broad range of knowledge and skills' and 'the role of the school is to teach students vocation-specific knowledge and skills'. These two positions should be understood as poles at each end of a continuum, with each of the teachers we interviewed placed somewhere along this continuum.

The role of the school is to provide students with a broad knowledge base and general skills

In this position, school should provide students with a broad knowledge base and general skills that can support training in a variety of vocational situations. This includes, for example, communication skills, hygiene knowledge, and general subjects such as mathematics and languages. From this position, the schools' role is to contribute with non-specialised knowledge that can serve as a foundation for, or an explanation of, the work tasks students encounter during workplace training.

Teachers who emphasise the importance of a broad knowledge base try to frame school-based education and training as meaningful beyond its immediate practical application. This position can influence the students' narratives in different ways. For students who construct the narrative 'I want to use the knowledge I have acquired at school during workplace-based training', this position can either reinforce or destabilise their expectations. When teachers succeed in making the relevance of broad, general knowledge explicit, they strengthen students' belief that school-based education and training is legitimate and future oriented. However, if this relevance remains implicit or unclear, these same students risk shifting towards the narrative 'I want to put school behind me', as the lack of clear applicability can undermine their initial motivation to draw on school-based training.

Students who construct the narrative 'I want to put school behind me' encounter a mismatch when encountering this position: the emphasis on general knowledge does not align with their expectation that only directly applicable, workplace-specific learning is meaningful. One teacher describes this tension:

A meaningful activity in a student's perspective is one that can be directly connected to his interests within farming. If the activity concerns pigs and you are only interested in cattle, you will experience a disconnect. It is not farming in general; it is the exact thing that I'm interested in. (teacher, farming)

Teachers positioned towards the 'broad knowledge' pole often describe the need to actively motivate students, as these students may struggle to see why such knowledge matters before they have encountered workplace practice. Therefore, this position can strengthen the student narrative 'I want to leave school behind me'. This is also why short workplace placements ('taster internships') are often seen as important:

Sometimes we experience that what we consider meaningful, the students do not see as important, because they have not yet encountered practice. Accordingly, our training changes and the students' approach changes after they return from practical training. (teacher, social and healthcare)

This shows that workplace experience can act as a catalyst, enabling students to reinterpret previously abstract school knowledge as meaningful – and thereby potentially adapting their narrative about the transition.

The role of the school is to provide students with specific vocational techniques and task-oriented skills

In this position, the purpose of school-based training is understood as preparing students for concrete situations and responsibilities they will encounter during workplace-based training. One teacher explains:

Actually, they [the students] are here to become qualified pedagogical assistants. And they are proud of that [...] They will learn all the craftsman-like stuff. ... because in the kindergarten, there is no substitute for being able to fold and make chatterboxes with the children. You cannot just stand there looking cool with the children, and it is smart to tell them that we are going to make chatterboxes. ... Often, they all come back talking about that it was great making those chatterboxes: 'Suddenly, I was surrounded by 10 kids'. (teacher, pedagogical assistant)

From this position, school-based education and training is considered meaningful when it mirrors workplace practice, enabling students to perform recognisable tasks and build confidence in their future role. The emphasis is therefore on applicability, task-specific competence, and immediate transferability.

This position resonates strongly with students who construct the narrative 'I want to use the knowledge I have acquired at school during workplace-based training.' For these students, teacher practices that highlight concrete techniques, tools, or task-specific knowledge reinforce their belief that school-based training has direct relevance for and can be applied to practice. This teachers' position thus affirms and stabilises such a narrative by framing school education and

training as preparatory, practical, and essential for becoming a legitimate professional.

Students constructing the narrative 'I want to put school behind me' may still find relevance in vocation-specific teaching if the school activities align closely with what they imagine they will be doing in practice. However, if the skills they are taught do not match their expectations of workplace-based training, this position can also reinforce their belief that only workplace-based training is relevant, and that school is valuable only when it replicates a workplace setting. In this way, the position can confirm or even intensify students' scepticism toward school-based training, depending on the extent to which teaching content is aligned with their anticipated professional identity.

In summary, we have constructed two positions characterising teachers' perceptions of the interrelation between school-based and workplace-based training. In practice, students encounter teachers located at different points along the continuum between these positions. These encounters shape the way the students construct their transition narratives. Some student narratives are thus reinforced, while others are challenged or reconfigured, depending on which teachers' positions they meet. In this sense, the teachers' positions serve as important conditions that structure how students come to understand the meaning, relevance, and legitimacy of what they learn at school upon entering the workplace.

Positions that students encounter in the workplace

After examining the positions that students encounter at school, we now turn our attention to the positions they encounter in the workplace. Based on the interviews with workplace trainers, two positions have been constructed representing opposing poles on a continuum: 'school-based training has no relevance for workplace-based training' and 'school-based training is relevant for practical training'.

School-based training has no relevance for workplace-based training

Some trainers take a rather negative position towards the relevance of school-based training. This position can be grounded in different assumptions. For some trainers, the primary purpose of school-based training is to socialise students into workplace norms and expectations, whereas task-specific training is something the student should acquire on the job:

No, I do not know what she has learnt at school, to be quite honest. However, it is mostly about adapting to not being in school anymore and now one has started at work. You are paid for what you are. You cannot just stand in the corner saying, 'I don't know what to do'. (trainer, farming)

Other trainers express a desire for the school to teach students practical skills, yet they still perceive the actual content of school-based education as irrelevant:

I think that what the students were able to do when they came from school was far from adequate. ... I sometimes think that the school does crazy things, like when the students are asked to collect stones on the beach because you can serve food on stones, and then they spend a whole day doing that. That is just silly. (trainer, gastronomy)

A defining element of this position is the absence of responsibility felt by trainers for linking school-based and workplace-based training. They position the school as solely responsible for any coordination or alignment:

Interviewer: Have you collaborated with the school?

Trainer: No.

I: Have you spoken to the school at all?

T: No, I have not spoken to the school yet. However, I assume that they will turn up at some point.

I: I think they will, yes. But you do not know anything about that?

T: No, I think that they will call around a fortnight before to make an appointment. However, whether it will be now or in half a year, that's impossible to know.

I: Your apprentice has learnt some things at school, various things about animal feed and cattle diseases and all kinds of things; is that something you notice in daily life? That the student brings something with him [from school]?

T: No, he doesn't.

I: And you would never ask: Okay, what have you learnt at school?

T: No. (trainer, farming)

In this exchange, the trainer expresses indifference towards both the school's role and the knowledge that students may bring into the workplace. The student's prior learning is neither explored nor valued, and no effort is made to build bridges between the two training contexts.

When juxtaposed with the student narrative 'I want to use the knowledge I have acquired at school during workplace-based training', this position can lead to disappointment or disillusionment. Students who arrive at the workplace expecting to apply and expand upon what they have learnt at school may experience a narrative disruption, as the trainer offers no interpretive space in which their school-based knowledge is recognised as legitimate or useful.

Conversely, this trainer position aligns closely with the student narrative 'I want to put school behind me'. For these students, the trainer's position confirms their belief that school-based education and training lacks relevance and that meaningful training happens only in the workplace. The position thus reinforces and stabilises this narrative, offering students an environment in which dismissing school-based knowledge appears natural and justified.

School-based training is relevant for workplace-based training

The other position amongst the trainers takes a more positive approach to school-based training. This position is characterised by an interest in learning, reflection, and development within the workplace, and thereby also in the knowledge students bring from school. Trainers adopting this position view students as a valuable source of renewal: their questions and fresh perspectives can disrupt established routines and stimulate professional reflection:

Someone arrives at our institution with a fresh pair of eyes, someone who might actually wonder and ask questions: 'Okay, I am curious why you did that in this way?' It makes the student question things, but also us who have been working at the same place for many years, where things have just become like 'That's how we usually do things'. So, the staff may start wondering: 'God yes, why do we actually do it this way?' (trainer, pedagogical assistant)

Here, student knowledge becomes an asset – not only for the student's workplace-based learning but also for the organisation's ongoing development. Having a student trainee is understood as an opportunity to reassess existing practices.

Trainers in this position also express a sense of responsibility for ensuring an interrelation between school- and workplace-based training:

I do think that the theory they learn [at school], it is also my job to help the student to link it [to practice in the workplace]. And it is sometimes a frustrating process for the students, because many of them think that they should know it all on their first day here. 'No, no, take it easy. It is like a layer cake; we will take one thing at a time, and then eventually on the last day, I think that you will be like: Ah, the theory fits in like this!' (trainer, social and health care)

This trainer acknowledges the work involved in helping students connect theory and practice, viewing it as a core responsibility in workplace training. Their position strongly reinforces the student narrative 'I want to use the knowledge I have acquired at school during workplace-based training'. By explicitly acknowledging the relevance of school-based knowledge, and by actively helping the student link it to practice in the workplace, trainers support students in maintaining or even strengthening this narrative. In such contexts, students often experience that school becomes more meaningful through their engagement in workplace-based training.

When juxtaposed with the student narrative 'I want to put school behind me', two scenarios are possible. First, the trainer may succeed in shifting the student's narrative, helping them reinterpret school-based education and training as relevant once they begin to see its practical implications. Alternatively, if the student maintains the view that only workplace-based training is legitimate, the mismatch between trainer position and student narrative may produce tension and frustration – for the student, who feels theory is being imposed on them, and

for the trainer, who is invested in bridging two worlds that the student refuses to connect.

Discussion

The different student narratives confirm that transition should be perceived as a process – as in research on boundary crossing (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Berner, 2010; Enochsson & Kilbrink, 2025). Previous research focuses on identity formation as taking place in the encounter with the workplace (Hegna, 2019; Tanggaard, 2007; Tårnesvik & Schmid, 2022). Our study shows that identity formation does not only take place during the transition but is also linked to experiences at school and at work, such as encounters with different teacher and trainer positions that may alter or reinforce students' narratives concerning – among other things – the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training. As such, various events in both these settings may encourage students to negotiate and ascribe new meaning to their interrelation. It is important to note that this negotiation is an ongoing process that extends beyond the point of transition from school to work. In this article, we have focused on the impact of teachers and trainers on their students' narratives.

Compared to previous research, which has often focused on whether VET students perceive an interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training (Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2022), our study unfolds the students' narratives about the substance of the interrelation. For instance, in relation to Akkerman and Bakker's (2011) notion of discontinuity, our study depicts students' perceptions of a lack of continuity in the transition, while also showing that such discontinuity can be meaningful for some students who want to leave school behind them, thus nuancing the general perception of the desired interrelation.

Many previous studies have concerned how to support students' transition to workplace training in various ways (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Bartman et al., 2018; Johannesen et al., 2022; Schaap et al., 2012; Schoop et al., 2023; Utvær & Saur, 2019). Extending students' perceptions about the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training, the students' narratives can contribute to and potentially qualify dialogues and reflections among teachers, trainers, and students.

The teacher and trainer positions identified in our study and juxtaposed with the students' narratives can serve as points of identification and reflection in relation to the transition process, pointing to opportunities for learning, including learning from discontinuities in the transition (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). However, realising this potential requires communication between school and workplace, and identifying and reflecting on differences and similarities, including the ability to apply the varying perspectives of both teachers and

trainers (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Louw, 2017). Our study has pointed to different perceptions of the responsibility for establishing and ensuring coherence between the training contexts which does not unequivocally align with the perception that schools and workplaces should share this responsibility (Kilbrink, 2013; Louw & Katznelson, 2019; Sappa et al., 2018; Sauli, 2021).

Based on evidence that integrating school-based training within workplace-based training helps students understand the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training (Bisgaard, 2018; Fjellström & Kristmansson, 2019; Onstenk & Blokhuis, 2007), the trainer position that 'school-based training has no relevance for practical training' seems problematic. However, this may not be the case for students who want to put school behind them. Thus, juxtaposing the positions may lead to scenarios that, while not conforming to ideas of proficient learning processes, may suit some students.

As to whether the positions outlined in this article accurately reflect the thoughts of students, teachers, and trainers regarding the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training, it should be emphasised that the positions are analytical poles at each end of a broad spectrum of perceptions and opinions that we encountered in our study.

Finally, one might ask whether studying perceptions of the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training leads to a better understanding of students' transitions? At the outset, we assumed that a clear interrelation is pivotal for a harmonious transition. However, juxtaposing different student, teacher, and trainer perceptions showed that such a clear interrelation is not necessarily decisive for a smooth transition.

Conclusion

This article has examined how students' experiences of the transition to the first period of workplace-based training is shaped by students', teachers', and trainers' perceptions regarding the interrelation of school-based and workplace-based training. The analysis constructed two student narratives while at school and two student narratives after commencing workplace-based training, as well as two teacher and two trainer positions. Combining the student narratives with the teacher and trainer positions not only highlights that discontinuity can be considered positive by some students and trainers. Acknowledging the differences between student, teacher, and trainer positions is also an argument for improving tripartite cooperation between these parties.

Declaration on use of AI tools

AI-based tools (ChatGPT, OpenAI) were used to support language editing and formulation, as English is not our native language. The authors take full responsibility for the analysis, interpretations, and conclusions presented in the article.

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