



Original Article

Role of Headmasters, Teachers, and Supervisors in Knowledge Transfer about Occupational Health and Safety to Pupils in Vocational Education



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ABSTRACT

Background: Young people are at an increased risk for illness in working life. The authorities stipulate certain goals for training in occupational health and safety (OHS) in vocational schools. A previous study concluded that pupils in vocational education had limited knowledge in the prevention of health risks at work. The aim of the current study, therefore, was to study how OHS training is organized in school and in workplace-based learning (WPL).

Methods: The study design featured a qualitative approach, which included interviews with 12 headmasters, 20 teachers, and 20 supervisors at companies in which the pupils had their WPL. The study was conducted at 10 upper secondary schools, located in Central Sweden, that were graduating pupils in four vocational programs.

Results: The interviews with headmasters, teachers, and supervisors indicate a staggered picture of how pupils are prepared for safe work. The headmasters generally give teachers the responsibility for how goals should be reached. Teaching is very much based on risk factors that are present in the workshops and on teachers' own experiences and knowledge. The teaching during WPL also lacks the systematic training in OHS as well as in the traditional classroom environment.

Conclusion: Teachers and supervisors did not plan the training in OHS in accordance with the provisions of systematic work environment management. Instead, the teachers based the training on their own experiences. Most of the supervisors did not receive information from the schools as to what should be included when introducing OHS issues in WPL.

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1. Introduction

The National Agency for Education is the central administrative authority for the public school system in Sweden. The Agency's education act for upper secondary schools established that pupils should develop and acquire values and knowledge [1]. To acquire knowledge that will enable them to personally contribute towards the prevention of a harmful environment is another important goal [2]. To reach these goals, the Agency established guidelines for schools in which headmasters and teachers are to plan their teaching and to determine what aims they should examine [3].

The Swedish Work Environment Authority is working for the right to healthy, safe, and stimulating working conditions. A way to reach this goal is to issue regulations. One such regulation that workplaces must have in place relates to systematic work environment management (SWEM). The aim of this provision is to continuously work on the implementation of safety improvements in the workplace and to provide opportunities for workers to contribute toward those improvements [4].

The literature clearly demonstrates that, compared to the older workforce, young people are more vulnerable to incidents and accidents when entering the workplace [5,6].

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Some studies have concluded that training in occupational health and safety (OHS) is important and needs to be included in vocational training and in workplace-based learning (WPL). This training can be applied to the learning method as well as to the course content [3,7–10]. The literature features several studies that, in general, discuss the importance of choosing methods to successfully motivate pupils to assimilate and use new knowledge. Several cases mention interactive methods, specially developed programs, and daily coaching of supervisors as new and effective methods for reaching the younger generation [11–16].

Another study points out that, even if good instructions regarding safety issues are present in the workplace, such instructions are inadequate for those in WPL [17].

Köpsén's [18] studies on the ways in which vocational teachers describe their teacher identities show that teachers believe that their fostering role, as well as their life and work experience, is important.

Several authors highlight the importance of close cooperation between school and work in order to convey relevant and desired knowledge. The knowledge of teachers and experts in the workplace must have a higher status, and the different systems must find a model of cooperation and partnership. Companies must also be more willing to provide WPL for pupils [19–22]. The literature illustrates that communication between pupil, teacher, and supervisor is the most successful way to reach training goals [23].

A previous study concluded that vocational education pupils had a limited knowledge of how to prevent health risks at work and lacked a systematic way to approach hazard control [24]. Therefore, the aim of this study was to identify how training in OHS is organized in vocational education. In conjunction with that aim, the following aspects were examined: (1) headmasters' opinions of their roles; (2) how teachers organize training; and (3) how training is organized as a part of WPL.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Study design

The study design used a qualitative approach that included interviews with headmasters, teachers, and supervisors. Headmasters were interviewed to gain an understanding of their overall goals for education on health and safety issues. Teachers were asked about the daily training of pupils with respect to health and safety issues. The vocational school pupils were participating in WPL; their supervisors were interviewed about the content in the WPL introduction and about the work tasks.

2.2. Study group

The Swedish education system is based on 9 years of compulsory school. After completing compulsory school, at the age of approximately 16 years, all youths are entitled to continue with a 3-year voluntary upper secondary school education. The upper secondary school consists of 18 different national programs. Some of the programs focus on the study of science, and others are vocational programs that include WPL [25].

The study group consisted of 12 headmasters and 20 teachers in 10 upper secondary schools and 20 supervisors at WPL companies. The 10 schools were included in the previous study of pupils' in vocational education knowledge about OHS [24]. Six of the teachers taught graduating classes in industrial technology programs, five teachers taught in the restaurant management and food program, five teachers taught in the transport program, and four teachers taught in the handicraft program (in which pupils specialized in wood). The supervisors worked at five industrial settings, five

transport companies, five restaurants, and five wood companies (Table 1).

The upper secondary schools and the WPL companies are located in the middle region of Sweden.

The schools, which are both private and community schools, were selected from a register of the Swedish National Agency for Education. The workplaces and supervisors were all used in the WPL arranged by those schools.

2.3. Interview protocol

The interviews were undertaken on an individual basis, with each lasting approximately 45 minutes, and were conducted by two of the researchers.

The interviewees were initially verbally informed about the purpose of the study, and then by an informative letter, to determine the extent of pupils' education about OHS and risks in their future work. The interview guide consisted of opening questions and four to five main questions. All participants were asked to describe their backgrounds. The main questions posed to the headmasters were the following: "How is SWEM organized at the school?"; "How is the pupils' OHS-education organized?"; "What kind of routine does the school have concerning pupils' WPL?"; and "How does the school train the supervisors at WPL?" The main questions asked of the teachers were as follows: "How do you organize the pupils' training in OHS issues?"; "Describe the pupils' interest in OHS issues"; "What are you doing to increase their interest in OHS?"; "How do you follow up the pupils' WPL?"; and "How do you cooperate with the WPL supervisors and companies?" The main questions posed to the supervisors were as follows: "How do you introduce the pupils to OHS?"; "Describe the pupils' interest in OHS issues"; "What are you doing to increase their interest in OHS?"; and "How do you cooperate with the vocational schools?" Additional probing questions followed each question.

2.4. Analytical procedure

The interviews with teachers and supervisors were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional. The headmaster

Table 1

Study population divided into headmasters, teachers in represented programs and supervisors in companies used for WPL

Headmaster	Teacher at respective program	Supervisor in company for WPL	WPL company number of employees
No. 1 (M)	Transport (M)	(M)	4
No. 2 (F)	Transport (M)	(M)	39
	Handicraft, wood (M)	(M)	11
No. 3 (F)	Industrial technology (M)	(F)	1,500
No. 4 (M)	Handicraft, wood (M)	(M)	327
No. 5 (M)	Handicraft, wood (M)	(M)	4
No. 6 (M)	Industrial technology (M)	(M)	11
No. 7 (F)	Rest management and food (F)	(M)	3
No. 8 (M)	Rest management and food (F)	(F)	10
	Industrial technology (M)	(M)	7
	Transport (M)	(M)	12
No. 9 (F)	Rest management and food (M)	—	—
	Industrial technology (M)	(M)	15
	Transport (M)	(M)	6
No. 10 (M)	Rest management and food (M)	(M)	8
	Industrial technology (M)	(M)	28
	Handicraft, wood (M)	(M)	3
No. 11 (M)	Rest management and food (M)	(F)	20
	Transport (M)	(M)	10
No. 12 (M)	Industrial technology (M)	(M)	48

F, female; M, male; WPL, workplace-based learning.

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