Organising Inclusive Transitions in Vocational Education and Training in a Rural Community in Norway

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Abstract

Our study examines the organising of transitions in Vocational Education and Training in a rural Norwegian municipality. In Norway, Vocational Education and Training is diverse and interlinked in continual organising. Organising, in this context, is a continuous set of actions forming recognisable patterns that become institutions. An upper secondary Vocational Education and Training case study was conducted in a rural municipality. The case study included interviews with students, teachers, leaders and company representatives. The study investigated in what ways the organising of rural Vocational Education and Training supported students' crossroads and transitions to limit marginalisation. The findings indicate that actants in the network, as well as a balance between individuals' needs and labour market requirements, are stabilising factors. The interdisciplinary training office is an important choreographer in active networking, and it is also important for teachers and students to bridge over and interact with Vocational Education and Training companies early on in their education. Transition as a path to inclusion is a learning and developmental process that occurs in continuous, alternating interactions between education and work.

Keywords: *rural education, vocational education, organisation, theory of organising, lifeworld*

Introduction

Rural education is vital to the economic, social and environmental viability of nations. It is essential for democratic equity. However, according to research, there are fewer educational opportunities and other services available in rural areas compared to urban areas (Brauer & Dymitrow, 2014; Corbett, 2015). The manifestation of inequality goes beyond the urban-rural divide; it also has regional and subregional contexts (United Nations, 2022). In Norway, the term *rural* refers to peripheral areas eligible for national aid for transport, investment and payroll taxes. Regional differences are closely connected to the region's level of education, unemployment and business structure (Hovdhaugen & Skålholt, 2019).

Rural education may be undermined by unevenly distributed resources, knowledge and life chances (Corbett, 2015). In Norway, the number of schools decreased from 3140 to 2858 between 2008 and 2018, with most closures occurring in rural areas (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2018). Under the influence of market-based goals, the centralisation of rural schools was advocated with the belief that larger schools could provide better learning and social environments (Kvalsund, 2019). However, neither European nor Norwegian research has

reported a correlation between school size and educational results (Iversen et al., 2010; Hargreaves et al., 2009). Instead, research reports that due to the smaller size of schools in rural areas, teachers develop closer relationships with their students and attend to individual needs (Villa & Knutas, 2020). Schools are, in addition, actively engaged in their local communities through their curriculum and school practices (Aðalsteinsdóttir, 2008; Autti & Bæck, 2021; Gristy et al., 2020). Thus, learning by participation in community-active schools with place-based and place-conscious education is common in rural areas. Learning with standardised teaching methods that focus on imparting and gaining second-hand knowledge in selected abstract school subjects is more typically found in urban schools (Kvalsund, 2019).

Turning our focus to Vocational Education and Training (VET), neoliberal ideas of education have affected upper secondary education (including VET) in terms of pressure towards completion and specialisation (Skålholt et al., 2023; The Norwegian Government, 2021). Research suggests that inclusion and fostering democracy are just as important for society as skills training (Rosvall & Nylund, 2022). From a rural point of view, standardisation and centralised educational policies result in local VET reflecting the economies and identities of a neoliberal society (Helms Jørgensen, 2004), especially since rural circumstances are regularly judged by urban standards. In rural areas, place-conscious education and local institutions (e.g., VET and the local labour market) work together. The co-existence of these institutions is crucial for enhancing the resilience of rural communities, as it ensures access to a variety of important resources that are not dependent on a single organisation (McAreavey, 2022). Urban standards do not necessarily take into consideration local variations affecting transitions in VET.

In Norway, over half of upper secondary students (who have completed 10 years of compulsory schooling) choose VET. Urban regions show 71% of students opting for college-preparation programs. In medium-sized municipalities, many students choose vocational programs. In the smallest rural communities, as many as 68% opt for VET (Statistics Norway, 2023). As Milmeister et al. (2022) pointed out, additional research is needed to explore how participation, transition and organising of VET develop within different contexts.

Following Corbett (2015), we understand that urban standards, through the organising (Czarniawska, 2014) of VET, will influence students' lives. We find that research on rural VET contributes to expanding an understanding of the specific characteristics and social-cultural values of particular rural municipalities. Similarly, including lifeworld perspectives on the organising of VET will provide knowledge about students' transitions, the risks of marginalisation, and possible interventions. From a lifeworld perspective, identity construction occurs through the creation of places, which are experienced phenomena of the lived world. Social divisions, hierarchies and distinctions are also established in these places, influencing people's lifeworlds (Farrugia, 2014; Habermas, 1985). Consequently, the relationship to place and the transition between education and work are constitutive parts of young people's identities and life paths (Farrugia, 2014).

It is important to counteract the standards of urban regions. We contribute with research on a rural municipality and the organising of upper secondary VET, to gain insights into educational circumstances and distinctive rural characteristics (Corbett, 2015). Exploring VET students' transitions, we intend to provide knowledge on the risks of marginalisation as well as possible mitigations, with the question: In what ways does the organising of rural vocational education and training support student crossroads and transitions to impede marginalisation?

Background

Historically, vocational education followed a pattern where people apprenticed under a master in their trade. The Industrial Revolution brought significant changes, leading to the abandonment of the former apprenticeship system (Sennett, 2008). As a result, widely different VET systems

emerged. The Nordic VET systems are predominantly known for their robustness and appeal to a significant portion of the youth demographic. When examining VET systems comparatively, the focus tends to highlight differences rather than similarities and variations that exist in the organising of VET, especially in terms of work-based learning. Targeting youth who have completed compulsory schooling, VET serves a dual purpose in Nordic societies: fostering civic values in upcoming generations and equipping them with essential skills for workforce advancement. These dual functions are intricately intertwined.

The dual VET system in Norway consists of two years of school education and two years of apprenticeship in a company or institution. The system involves several crossroads where young people transition on their path. The transitions are critical, in the sense that they pose a risk of students becoming marginalised from education (Michelsen et al., 2021; Rapp & Knutas, 2023). Counties are responsible for providing students with relevant apprenticeships, compensating employers for hiring apprentices, and organising the final exam (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2022). In Norway, a known challenge in the VET transition is obtaining an apprenticeship in the third year. If students succeed, they are more likely to complete upper secondary education, regardless of their background (Statistics Norway, 2020). However, for students in rural areas, there are challenges with limited local labour markets, since small companies have less capability to host apprentices or hire new personnel (Antonsen et al., 2016; Karlsdóttir et al., 2019).

Research indicates that students in rural areas often ponder their future in a gendered and classed manner, based on the local labour market and structural and infrastructural characteristics (Rönnlund, 2020). The lack of adequate educational facilities in rural areas makes choice and independence crucial in the transition to upper secondary or further education (Rosvall et al., 2018). Norwegian rural research on VET found that teachers who adapted teaching to students' living circumstances supported students in clarifying values, and in identifying potential career paths, thus in turn supporting equity and increasing the possibilities of students reaching their goals (Rapp & Knutas, 2023).

Internationally, neoliberal discussions on transitions in VET repeatedly correlate the costs of students not completing their exams with economic growth demands in labour markets, while ignoring rural perspectives (Karlsdóttir et al., 2019). Rural research in the Nordic countries reports that neoliberal policies have resulted in several negative consequences for education (Villa & Knutas, 2020). The consequences for rural education include an increase in students' commuting distances and fewer opportunities for low-income students. Additionally, due to rising costs in small municipalities, fewer study programs are available (Karlsdóttir et al., 2019). This, in turn, has resulted in lower graduation rates for students in rural municipalities (Lind, 2019; Topsøe Larsen, 2017).

One additional aspect of the transition between school and apprenticeship is the overlap between school rationality and production rationality where, in practice, cooperation between businesses and educational institutions often falls short (Esmond, 2018; Helms Jørgensen, 2004). Rural research finds that strong connections between advisors, students and teachers can promote essential networking in VET, making the transition between school and apprenticeship easier (Rapp et. al. 2023). To promote smooth transitions in VET, Angus et al. (2011) and Milmeister et al. (2022) pointed out that we should not only focus on individual barriers, but also pay attention to institutional barriers and opportunities, such as collaboration between schools, training offices and businesses.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is built on concepts from three interconnected theories: a theory of organising, communicative action theory, and the concept of personal curriculum. We

draw from Czarniawska's (2014) description of organising, Habermas's (1985) communicative action theory and his description of the lifeworld and system world, and Billett's (2023) perspective on personal curriculum. Combining these three perspectives allows us to explore how a specific way of organising VET may influence the way the system colonises people's lifeworlds and then affects their pathways through VET into apprenticeship and work.

A theory of organising (Czarniawska, 2014) is situated within social constructivism, where reality is seen as socially constructed. However, when we ask how the world is socially constructed, we see that reality is constantly being reconstructed by those who observe it and those who organise it. A theory of organising is, therefore, an action theory with a focus on processes (Weick et al., 2005). Such processes occur in the interactions amongst an organisation's characteristics, the positions (places) of individuals involved, problems and events. An institutional order is only valid at a specific place and time. Studying organisation through actant networks is a compromise designed to capture both the constructivist (ongoing) aspect of all organising and its effect at a specific point in time. Within the theory of organising, there are points of connections between actions that create actors. Various actors in the actant network attempt to stabilise each others' identities through the creation of actions. The actions stabilise representation and relationships (Czarniawska, 2014).

An organisational everyday life is composed of seemingly fragmented and loosely connected events. It is when people talk about their daily lives that meaning emerges, since meaning-making has a historical link. Additionally, the activities that people perform in an organisation help create order in chaos and make meaning visible (Czarniawska, 2014). Through sense-making (Weick et al., 2005), people try to make new events meaningful by placing them within the framework of previous events. Episodes are linked together through narratives that provide meaning, and organisational practices weave together the symbolic, the practical and the political (Weick et al., 2005) as in the encounter between young individuals, education and labour markets.

Habermas's (1985) concept of the lifeworld consists of two structural components: culture (the cultural tradition that shapes actors' interpretation in schemas and value standards) and society, or more precisely, the institutional order in a society. In addition to the above elements, Habermas proposed a third fundamental structure for the lifeworld, namely the motivation patterns and competence repository for action that he called personality structures. For example, a choice of secondary education deals with cultural conditions and the society the individual lives in. However, to navigate this society, individuals must develop the ability to calculate, command, organise, negotiate, forego short-term gain in favour of long-term goals, seek new profit opportunities, and take calculated risks. Personality structures constitute resources for social action. Social action, therefore, depends on three structures in the lifeworld: culture, society and personality.

Lifeworld is a subjective microcosm where individuals interact and communicate with each other. While the lifeworld is the world we experience as it appears to our senses, our understanding, and our emotional life, the system constitutes a rationalised, impersonal and regulated world. Habermas (1985) pointed out that the system world has its roots in the lifeworld, in the sense that, in close interaction between individuals, the system world begins to develop its structures. People must, for example, interact to create regulations that are later cemented into bureaucracies. The more powerful these structures are, the less room there is for communication and consensus in the lifeworld. According to Habermas, these rationalised structures can threaten communication and thus exert control over the lifeworld.

The concept of personal curriculum (Billett, 2023) should not be confused with an individual curriculum or with the institutional curricula on which every school organisation bases its education. Instead, the concept of personal curriculum is exploratory in its design and aims to

explore the pathways or life tracks of learning and development that young people experience on their journey from school to work. Personal curriculum is non-standardised; it is personal. It considers the breadth of educational experiences that an individual encounters in a lifetime. When viewed as a set of personal experiences, curriculum aligns with its original definition as a pathway to follow for progress (Billett, 2023). We suggest that the concept of personal curriculum can be beneficial in understanding transitions within VET as a continuous pathway. This pathway can be linked to students' lifeworlds, as well as the wider system, and can be either well or poorly organised depending on the actant network involved in the transition.

Methodology

To investigate how the organising of rural VET supports student crossroads and transitions to limit marginalisation, we have chosen to conduct a case study. Flyvberg (2011) described how a case study is less about methodology and more about determining which unit should be studied and defining the boundaries of that unit. The case consisted of a local VET system in a rural area (Hovdhaugen & Skålholt, 2019). Included in the case study were students, a school, an interdisciplinary training office, and companies and institutions offering apprenticeship placements. The four parts of the system are interconnected by a series of concrete and mutually related events that occur at specific times and places, making up the case (Flyvberg, 2011). In Flyvberg's approach, case studies focus on relationships the case has with its surroundings, the context in which it exists. Thus, case studies generate context-dependent knowledge.

The chosen case could be studied in several ways. In this case study, qualitative in-depth interviews (Rapley, 2007) were conducted with strategically selected representatives from the four parts of the VET system (students, school, training office, and companies/institutions). The selection of informants represented diversity and variation related to the VET system, its context, and its organisation. The design of each interview guide was a little different since each was directed toward a specific part of the VET system. The parts were paired with the interview guides, which consisted of four themes: student and environment, organising for inclusion, school and work life, and resources regarding students' needs. In the students' interview guide, we asked about their experiences of VET at the school and specifically of the vocational program regarding inclusion. We asked about challenges in the transition between school and work, about learning at work, and their future thoughts on work life in the rural community.

The data were collected in a county in Central Norway. The VET system under study was in a village with about 4000 inhabitants. The local labour market in the village consisted of one large construction company and several electrical companies, two other major industries, and a sawmill. Additionally, the public sector and the municipality were important employers in health, education, childcare and public welfare. The interdisciplinary training office was located at the upper secondary school which had approximately 115 students enrolled each year. Despite its size, the school offered first- and second-year programs in childcare and youthcare, health sciences, construction, and electrical work. Each year, more than 50% of the students chose VET. For example, in 2022, 65 students chose vocational programs, while 51 chose college preparatory programs. Twenty-five teachers worked at the school in addition to other professionals. The administration consisted of a principal and two other leaders who worked as a team. One leader was responsible for VET.

The parts that delimit the case, as mentioned, were a local VET system and its subunits. The interviews were conducted with strategically selected informants, representing organisational actors in the four parts of VET (students, a school, an interdisciplinary training office, and companies/institutions offering apprenticeship placements). The qualitative data consisted of 12 interviews with significant actors for VET and five group interviews with students and apprentices; each group included five students. The informants were selected with the support of the principal and based on each person's pivotal role in VET transitions.

Interviewees included:

- the former school leader, as he played a leading role in establishing the current system;
- the current school leader;
- the vocational education leader;
- the school counsellor;
- a teacher from the electrical program;
- a teacher from the childcare and youthcare program;
- the head of the interdisciplinary training office;
- apprentice supervisors from healthcare;
- apprentice supervisors from childcare;
- apprentice supervisors from a construction company;
- four teachers from the healthcare program (one group interview);
- two teachers from the construction program (one interview); and
- students and apprentices (five group interviews).

The authors conducted the data gathering together. The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research approved the research. We handled data in line with the law on personal data. Following ethical guidelines for conducting research, the participants were provided with oral and written information before the interviews. We asked for permission to record the interviews on a secure device and informed the interviewees that the recorded material would be deleted as soon as the anonymised transcriptions were completed. All participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point. In the analysis, we have ensured the de-identification of location by not using any names of persons, places or organisations. In line with the National Research Ethics Committee, we emphasised the importance of treating participants with respect, seeking good outcomes, ensuring fairness, and maintaining integrity.

In the analysis of the transcribed interviews, we worked together. In the first phase, we used thematic analysis. We found that the data from the different parts of the VET system correlated with topics such as safety in students' learning environments, working on inclusive transitions, cooperation in networks with the labour market, and allocating and using resources. Based on the four categories from the first phase, we worked with concepts as exploratory categories in the second phase. The concepts we used were organising, actant network, meaning and sense-making (Czarniawska, 2008; Weick et al., 2005), life- and system-world, culture and tradition (Habermas, 1985); and personal curriculum, pathways and life tracks (Billett, 2023). The term *actant* is used because not everyone who acts can become an independent actor with their own voice, but many are part of networks that act as actors (Czarniawska & Hernes, 2005). The analysis resulted in the themes presented in the findings: the actant network (Czarniawska, 2014), action and meaning (Weick et al., 2005), and students' lifeworlds and personal curriculum (Habermas, 1985; Billett, 2023).

Findings

Several different organisations and actant networks were involved in the transition from school to apprenticeship, as the transition occurred over an extended time period. In the findings section, the various organisations and their characteristics are described, as well as institutionalised actant networks as they appear to an observer in the specific case. These constitute the context in which the transition is situated. Furthermore, the actions of the various actors in the network are described; for example, what is done to create opportunities and meaning for the students. The findings also include how students perceived the organisation and collaboration among various actors, and how personal curriculum took shape in the students' lifeworlds. The context of rurality, as theorised by Corbett (2015), frames the results.

The Actant Networks

In the rural municipality, the VET transition from school to apprenticeship was facilitated by actant networks that crisscrossed between the various organisations and actors in VET. A local interdisciplinary training office was established at the school to support VET students who were not receiving satisfactory follow-up from the central training offices in the county. Hiring someone with a pedagogical background to lead the training office was essential and made integration between school and training easier:

> I think it is very important that she came from the education sector and had a pedagogical approach to her role in the training office. Because then we get an understanding that, okay, the expertise lies in the companies. We should organise and guide as best we can, and we should handle all the necessary paperwork and such. That is our responsibility. However, the expertise should reside in the companies, with the skilled workers in the companies. (Former principal)

The actant networks involved in the transition had a time perspective; that is, transition occurs as a process over several years. In secondary school, students participated in VET to gain information and experience about vocational training. The head of the training office met the students for the first time in the 9th grade during an open day. The students were informed about vocational paths during internships and parent meetings. The head of the training office and the school counsellor remained part of the students' network after they started upper secondary education:

> I've arranged it so that she [the leader of the training office] is present when we provide information about vocational education. We include her when we visit classes in November and provide information after they have started and when they make their choices. … At the parent meeting before Christmas in the 10th grade, she is present. … Moreover, if there is anything she needs cooperation on regarding a student who has had some adjustments and whom we have had in student services, we assist them when they are apprentices. … Since she's at the school, it's fantastic because you can meet her in the area, or they can make an appointment and ask about something related to career choices. (Counsellor)

The students' options in VET and transitions were a shared responsibility among leaders, teachers and the guidance counsellor. Communication was ongoing, and homeroom teachers played a central role in referring cases to the counsellor. Subject teachers also contributed to student success by providing subject-specific information. Another example of the actant network was the continuous collaboration in team meetings:

> If there's a student who struggles a bit in mathematics, the mathematics teacher often comes and talks to both the class teacher and teachers in program subjects, for example. Then they find a solution to the problem right then and there. (Teacher, construction)

> Just take the teacher team meetings … where we sit and talk about the students, and it's also about how we present the students. … It's often like that in those meetings; we see them, what can we do to make this work? So we sit there, and then all the teachers find out what the problem or challenge is, and then we try to make the best of it. (Teacher, childcare and youthcare program)

The school's leadership team also worked closely together. Since the team was small, everyone shared a common meaning of what was happening in the school. The idea was that the connections between leadership and the students should be strong, and the outcomes of the leader's initiatives that were implemented should be visible to, and seen as important for, the students:

We are a very close-knit leadership team; we work together a lot, and we have a good understanding of what each of us does. … what we discuss, talk about, and work on should ultimately have an impact on the students, whether it's in terms of learning, social aspects, or in some other way. … We talk a lot about it, that what we initiate should have an impact on the end-user. It's crucial for us. (Leader, vocational education)

One important aspect of organising rural VET was teamwork at different levels. For example, the four vocational disciplines collaborated across subjects and in projects. All staff, including administration, kitchen staff and janitors at the upper secondary school, gathered in the staff room during lunch breaks. Problems that arose during the day could thus be addressed immediately, and more administrative matters, such as the need for a substitute teacher or transportation to a construction site, could be resolved directly.

They collaborate, you know … But the collaboration, we collaborate crosswise, I think, everywhere, and the same goes for the carpentry students. We have such close relationships everywhere, so we can reach each other all the time; everyone gathers in the staff room every day … we pull the threads we need, and I think there's a culture of using the resources we have available to help our students reach their goals. … I don't perceive anyone as being more concerned with themselves than with the students, and I think that's a great thing. (Leader, vocational education)

Staff reported that they collaborated to support students in reaching their goals in several ways. The systems at play also related to the fact that some services, often found outside VET education at the rural municipality, were gathered under the same roof. The situation with different actors relating to different organisations under the same roof had an impact on how transitions and the risk of marginalisation for students could be handled:

Are there some we miss? … I mean, there are people who get sick, who drop out, refuse to show up, things like that … we have systems in place to support individual students. So, it's certain that some have slipped through the cracks for us, I'm convinced of that … we have the follow-up service here at the school. And that's a factor that's a success criterion … that the counsellor and the follow-up service here are the same person. And the training office is on the school premises, which is also very, very convenient. Our teachers are skilled workers who come from the local business community, who know the owners of the businesses and what they work on, and who fits where … I think the individual level is a key to getting satisfied students and results. (Leader, vocational education)

And it's now a choice that we do it, and then we stand by our decision, and we are willing to bear the cost if we don't get the funding for it. (Head of school)

Parallel with resources initiated to support students at risk, the counsellor made sure to work closely with teachers, providing teachers with support on how to best progress with individual students. In addition, the counsellor participated in teacher-team meetings where the challenges and opportunities for individual students' progressions were aired. Class teachers were responsible for each class, while subject teachers had subject responsibility. At the school, collaboration was frequent through formal systems, such as annual schedules and meetings, as well as informal everyday conversations.

When students engaged in practice at work or apprenticeships in companies within the municipality, the school collaborated closely with the business community, which was both accessible and supportive of the school and the students. As the school of VET was small, the staff had opportunities to match students with the companies. For students at risk, the matching and tight network between the school and companies was highly significant.

In the transition from school to work, vocational teachers' networks and the school's general interactions with its surroundings were important for students' learning during their school years

and their transition to apprenticeships. The findings indicated that what the students learnt at school was significant for their socialisation as skilled workers and how they experienced being in practice at a company or institution:

> Over one year of school here I've learned a lot practical and interesting stuff, which I imagine I could make use of. Both later in life, but also in the career path I've chosen. (Student, VET)

Actions and Meaning

Our study showed how important the two years of education at the local school were for the students regarding the transition to apprenticeship that followed. The collaboration between schools and the local labour market was considered a key factor in the successful completion of VET. Employers expressed that their contribution through offering practical training and apprenticeships was an essential investment for the students' completion of VET. Schools have a dual responsibility: to educate students with the necessary skills to become productive workers, and to provide equal opportunities for students from all backgrounds to succeed in work and life.

All the VET programs sent their students to work at companies during the first year of education. The VET teachers prioritised practical work early on, something which came to the fore in a dialogue between two teachers in construction during a group interview:

> They are very eager to get started. They have a lot of energy when they come … It's about trying to gather that energy and channel it into something positive. … They want something to do, especially those who often end up in our program … we have to make them like the books that are related to the profession or the subject. And that's why what we do is important, I think. We introduce practical experience first … so that when they open the book, they can see that they've tried this. (Teacher 1, construction)

> Yes, exactly. Practice first, and then theory. And we emphasise that a lot. Very little theory at the beginning … Our leadership also says that we need to focus on the practical aspect. They have spent 10 years in school down the road here … so they have chosen construction and construction technology because they want to do something practical. We need to give them that opportunity. (Teacher 2, construction)

In the municipality during the first and second years of construction studies in VET education, the students engaged in meaningful, practical work that involved either working for a company or participating in a project related to the local community. The teachers were pleased with the abundance of real construction projects available to them. These projects provided students with opportunities to explore various vocational directions within the field of construction and construction technology that they could choose in their second year.

> People from the local community contact us, especially during this time of year, in June and during the summer. They have heard that we might be suitable for carrying out a construction project, so we almost have a luxury problem every summer when it comes to choosing which jobs to accept. (Teacher, construction)

Parallel with assignments given to the VET programs, there was work experience in a company. When a student first entered a company, they typically worked from 7 am to 3 pm. Through work experience, they established relationships, explored their interest in the profession, and tried out different tasks. During this period, they might discover their preferred area of work and come to build connections with fellow workers. If they made a good impression, they might return to the same company for work experience in their second year, increasing their chances of securing an apprenticeship. For students with difficulties establishing a work experience place for themselves at a company, teachers had good connections with the local labour market and could provide suggestions and help the students find something suitable.

Fortunately, we have enough contacts in the construction industry in our community, so we can help by checking around to see if there is anyone who could use an extra hand for a week. Usually, it works out, and they get into a company, and then things start rolling, and they become more confident that this was not so bad. Typically, by the next round, they have usually arranged their own placement. (Teacher, construction)

In a group interview, the teachers in healthcare stressed the importance of early practical adaptation. At the beginning of the semester, they focused on social relations within the student group and typically had some overnight trips together to support the social foundations of the learning environment.

The teachers stressed that it was crucial to encourage collaboration between first- and second-year VET students. They recognised the value of fostering a positive working culture with shared meanings and values among second-year students that could be passed on to their first-year peers. Over time, the teachers came to appreciate the significance of employing diverse and practical teaching methods in VET.

The aspect of variety is very important, as is the practical approach, that we have much collaboration between first and second year, I would say, is important. (Teacher, healthcare)

The education and labour market of the rural municipality in our study was gendered, with girls often choosing health and childcare while boys tended to choose construction and electricity. Since two of the programs in VET attracted mostly male students (though there were females), raising the status of the healthcare program was a priority for the VET staff.

So, we try to use the school and showcase ourselves to a greater extent. … We invite people here, the elderly and the developmentally disabled, and open up the school to them. We also have our own T-shirts for the section. Nice blue ones with a logo … to create a sense of pride for our field and subject area. (Teacher, healthcare)

Several of the teachers in healthcare had additional roles in rural VET. For instance, one teacher also worked as a special education advisor, another a counsellor, and yet another was an environmental advisor. Although their administrative tasks may have varied, their roles were interrelated and integrated in terms of the support they provided to students in their academic and personal pursuits. For instance, when the environmental advisor worked as a teacher in the classroom, there were close connections between the different roles she fulfilled:

The role of an environmental advisor is a bit peculiar because I'm sort of like a teacher at the same time as I'm an environmental advisor, and I'm supposed to help so that the students who have special challenges make some academic progress. But with some, we work more on the social aspects. We work on getting them to come to school and motivate them to sit in the cafeteria and have lunch, yes, because there's social anxiety and various other issues. So, it's a bit fuzzy to describe exactly what I do. But I prepare lessons and try to make it run smoothly for them during class. (Teacher, healthcare)

VET Teachers faced a wide range of academic levels among students. Collaboration among professionals was essential to guide all students through the educational path. The primary goal was to ensure that the students thrived and enjoyed their time at school.

Even when the transition from school to work was well organised, some students required individual attention on their pathway from school to work. Each year, some students started vocational programs and, after a while, realised that they had chosen the wrong path. Some realised it right away, but others discovered it after a few months. At the school, it was a collective task to find the best solution for each student. The rural municipality offered limited programs at upper secondary, and the job market was narrow; thus, compared to an urban situation, the students had fewer opportunities to choose from. The upper secondary school was

the first institution to help students in such cases. The efforts from the school to offer equal and flexible opportunities contributed to a high degree of completion.

> We have a strong sense of responsibility in such cases because we know that there is no other option here. I mean, if they are not in school, where are they then? … So, we take a very large responsibility to ensure they come here … and there's an advantage to living in the countryside. We set standards and have some expectations at school … I believe that other schools may lose students to other offerings. I mean, there are communities outside of school that students can apply to, and that happens to a lesser extent here. (Leader, vocational education)

VET staff at the rural school took responsibility for supporting the students along the pathway towards their exams. We found similar examples when students faced difficulties during apprenticeship. The supervisors at the companies or public sector expressed that there was a support network available to help them find effective solutions. At times, an apprentice may have needed to switch their workplace, or they may have needed to adapt to the tasks given to them at the company or institution. It was also possible to extend the apprenticeship period or to provide them with more opportunities to enhance their skills.

Students' Lifeworlds and Personal Curriculum

Certain values have guided the organising of the students' pathways by connecting to their lifeworlds and helping them create a personal curriculum. The counsellor expressed a value held by the school:

> In my core beliefs, I think it has always been there that everyone should be valued and able to accomplish things from their own perspective. I think that belief has been deeply ingrained. So, you have to be on the lookout for what suits each individual. (Counsellor)

There were positive and negative aspects of participating in a small school situated in a rural municipality, where the small number of programs limited students' choices of educational pathways, disciplines of apprenticeship, and vocations. However, the small size of the rural municipality influenced and, when necessary, enhanced the interactions in the actant network. Engagement to support students made way for the possibility of entering a pathway that was connected to students' future work, living and life.

The school paid close attention to the diverse range of students to support those who were skilled craftsmen but struggled with concentration and had faced unfavourable circumstances. As students, they were held accountable for their actions; they were provided with personalised support from their teachers. Additionally, the students were given guidance on their tasks to ensure their success.

> Essentially, we guide students in a manner that presents them with tasks that they can successfully complete. The teachers who instruct vocational subjects are adept at identifying appropriate tasks and training locations. However, some students may require additional support and guidance from a teaching assistant, environmental mentor, or teacher to prevent them from failing and losing confidence. Assisting them in realising their potential is essential. (Counsellor)

The students confirmed that teachers continued helping them until they understood and felt comfortable with their tasks. Since the school was small, teachers could find time to support students. For example, two students expressed how they had been struggling with reading and writing. Being in VET at a small school in a rural municipality had been successful for them. In a discussion in a group interview, students said:

> I have it too; the letters curl up when I'm reading, but if there's something I wonder about, I just ask the teacher. So, as you say, one might get it explained a bit better, yes. Can get a bit

more time; it's just about letting the teachers know that I have dyslexia, for example. Need a little more help.

Yes. And the teacher understands that.

They are very understanding. It's not threatening to let them know about it.

No, not at all. (Students, VET)

During the group interviews with the students, it was apparent that they valued adaptive tasks and practical education. As mentioned by the teachers, practical work was integrated into the curriculum starting from the first year of education. The small class sizes at the school allowed students to participate in a variety of practical tasks that may not have been possible in larger groups.

We went straight to work and had to start learning things very early, and it wasn't about getting a lot of information; it was straight into it. I thought that was great, fun, and fantastic. Getting right into it and learning practical skills and such. (Student, VET)

There are a lot of advantages, as said, it's quite direct. Start, learn, begin practical jobs, and keep growing, and keep at it all the time. For my part, at least, it's the best way to learn. When you get to start working in practice and working with your hands, and yeah, all that. (Student, VET)

The students emphasised the importance of gaining practical experience in the workplace. They found it supported their learning and provided opportunities to build connections and networks for future apprenticeships, summer jobs, and employment. In the public sector, the school and the public institutions had agreed that the sector provide the school with some alternative practice places. Thereafter, the students could make choices within the frame of the opportunities delivered. In electricity and construction, teachers encouraged students to make the call to the company by themselves. In a group interview, two students discussed the arrangement of finding practice or apprenticeship:

The teachers and the school prefer that we try to arrange it ourselves, yes. The teacher at the school wants us to handle it ourselves. (Student, VET)

But they want you to be independent. That's why they say that, but of course, if you can't find anyone, the teacher always has something available, where they take in people. So then he just takes initiative. (Student, VET)

VET is considered a wise choice in the rural municipality where the study was conducted. Several students chose vocational education out of interest. They enjoyed working with their hands, and they had parents who worked in the same profession. Some students made their choice due to an earlier overload in book studies. Next to being considered a wise choice, VET studies were regarded as a sensible choice in the rural municipality. In some part, a choice was connected to the opportunity to enter the job market quickly. The choice could also be considered sensible (considering the limited options for upper secondary education) if they wanted to stay in the local rural municipality. Then, by taking VET, the students found they could work anywhere in the world.

Well, the advantage of vocational education is that you can quickly enter the workforce with only a few years spent on studying. And people with vocational skills are needed everywhere in the world, even here in [place name]. There are many advantages to choosing VET. (Student, VET)

Students deliberated over the available VET programs at their upper secondary school. However, they were aware that their choices were restricted, and they evaluated different factors before making any decision. They pondered whether they wanted to continue in the same area or

explore other options. Despite this, once they made a choice, they tried to view it positively. Students in a group interview pondered their choices:

> *I was thinking about what options we had here, where I wanted to go, and there was an option that I wanted to pursue, yes. So it was an easy choice for me, at least. (Student, VET)*

> *Well, I might have wanted to go into construction engineering a bit. Still, it was a plus that there was also carpentry here, so I could choose that instead. And I'm happy with that choice. I'm satisfied with this choice. But if there had been construction engineering, I would have chosen that. (Student, VET)*

Discussion and Conclusion

Rural areas often face challenges in the organising of education and work due to limited resources. In rural areas, standardisation and centralised policies can hinder local VET from reflecting the unique identities and economies of the community. Urban standards of education often do not consider local variations in VET transitions, as for example the local labour market. It is important for local institutions, such as VET and the labour market, to work together for the resilience of rural communities (Helms Jørgensen, 2004; McAreavey, 2022). Inclusion and fostering democracy are equally crucial for society as skills training. VET is a matter of developing excellence in terms of virtues and good judgement or practical wisdom (Rosvall & Nylund, 2022; Tyson, 2015).

In our rural study, lifeworld perspectives shed light on identity formation through place-based experiences, influencing social divisions. Research indicates that factors like gender, class, parents' occupations and limited local labour markets shape students' career choices (Farrugia, 2014; Habermas, 1985; Rönnlund, 2020). In addition, rural youth prioritise independence in choosing a career, but also have a strong attachment to family and place, indicating ambivalence due to the lack of appropriate educational facilities (Rosvall et al., 2018). In that sense, it is crucial to investigate how the organising of rural VET supports student crossroads and transitions to limit marginalisation.

We find that integrating institutions for school and work prevents marginalisation risks in VET. The transition from the second year of education to the third year of apprenticeship is a critical point in vocational education, and completing VET is essential for future job opportunities (Falch & Nyhus, 2011). In line with crossroads and transitions, our findings indicate that educational institutions were committed, and all personnel involved in VET adapted to each individual student and their specific journey from school to work (Billett, 2023). The small size of the school made the actant network tightly integrated with several points of connection involving different roles. Leaders of vocational education, VET teachers and subject teachers worked closely together with the best interest of the students in mind. The staff constructed and stabilised each other's identity by recognising each other's value for the students (Czarniawska, 2014). The activities that people perform in an organisation contribute to sense-making and make meaning visible. The culture and values guided the meaning (Habermas, 1985; Weick et al., 2005); as the counsellor at the school said, "*everyone should be valued and able to accomplish things from their own perspective. I think that belief has been deeply ingrained.*"

We conclude that culture and values are central in a rural municipality; yet it is important to understand that, in local VET provision, practical actions created order in chaos and made meaning visible. When making sense of new events, staff, students and companies used previous experiences as a framework for understanding (Weick et al., 2005). Episodes were connected through narratives that provided meaning, and organisational practices weaved together the symbolic, the practical, and the political. We understand that it was the practical work, carried out in the transition from school to work and starting early in the first year at school, that overbridged the distinction between system and lifeworld (Habermas, 1985), and it also

moderated and integrated the difficult shift from school rationality to production rationality (Esmond, 2018; Helms Jørgensen, 2004).

The goal of VET is to bridge the gap between education and work. However, in practice, cooperation between businesses and educational institutions often falls short (Esmond 2018; Helms Jørgensen, 2004). From an educational perspective, work can be understood as a rationalised structure, difficult to change and communicate with. Considering the structural aspects of work, grades and standards will be important for VET students in finding employment. However, Habermas (1985) claimed that the system world has its roots in people's lifeworlds where they are required to interact and communicate to develop structures. Based on our findings, we claim that practical work which interlinks education and work—where students are recognised as responsible, able and valuable (political) actors—contributes to weakening the system world's cemented and bureaucratic structures. As a result, students' possibilities for inclusion and participation in the transition comes to the fore (Weick et al., 2005).

Our findings also suggest that the ongoing work of organising VET is underpinned by the actant network. In our study, the network stretched over a long period: the period when students met VET at upper secondary school, then there were two years of education, work experience and, finally, they moved to apprenticeship. While there were limited choices in programs and work, the network's engagement with organising a personal curriculum became even more important. In talking about organising a personal curriculum, we mean the way the leader of the school and of VET, the counsellor, and the leader of the interdisciplinary training office, together with teachers and central actors in the working life, organised and supported students' different pathways through education because everyone was valuable for the local community.

From the study, we conclude that a central aspect of organising is the interaction between different individuals, organisations, roles, positions and places involved in solving problems and creating events (Czarniawska, 2014). We found that the organising supported students' crossroads and transitions and the risk of student marginalisation was taken seriously, as all actants and their networks were regarded as equally important and involved in the students' paths toward their exams. At the centre of organising and the actant attention was the journey of the students and their personal curriculum and pathway through education and life (Billett, 2018). As the leader of VET said, *"I don't know anyone in our organisation who is more interested in him- or herself than in the students' success."*

Nevertheless, the small, rural school and the local environment offered limited opportunities for students. There were five study programs to choose from, as well as a gender-segregated VET education and labour market (Lorentzen & Vogt, 2021). Our findings indicate that the students chose in line with what was available and traditional in the rural area. This may be understood because the system world puts limitations on and shrinks the individual's lifeworld (Habermas, 1985). Making untraditional choices may, therefore, affect the students' personal curriculum (Billett, 2023) and exclude them from the rural pathway and the place-based and place-conscious education (Kvalsund, 2019).

The aspect of organising is a continually ongoing work that is not possible to study, except from a certain place at a specific time. Times and places shift during the transition and in our research we found points of connection that were crucial for the students' success. The points of connection supported students' transition; for example, the practical work carried out in collaboration with the local community and the labour market. Additionally, the findings from our study indicate that the sense-making which arose in the students' continuing interactions with teachers and workers in the labour market supported transitions and laid a foundation for finding employment at a later stage.

The interdisciplinary training office and its intersection point with the counsellor at the school played a role in limiting marginalisation. We found that in the organising, their roles

interconnected and stretched out to both the students and teachers at the school, and the leaders and supervisors for apprentices in working life; thus, organising creates a transition safety net. In contrast to Corbett's (2015) research that concluded with learning to leave, our study indicates that students in VET learn to stay. To conclude, in our study we found that it takes an organised village to raise a child.

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