

School-to-work Transitions for Students with Intellectual Disabilities: Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences of a Recent Workplace-Based Reform in Sweden

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Abstract

Having a job, or being employed, is associated with a number of positive effects. Although policies in Sweden support the right of people with disabilities to work and highlight access to employment as a priority, this group of people continues to lose out in employment against other citizens. However, little is known about actions or initiatives implemented to enhance labor market participation among people with disabilities. This study contributes useful findings on a promising implementation of a school-to-work transition initiative, workplace based learning (WBL), in special needs upper-secondary schools in Sweden. The aim of the study was to identify how teachers, having a key role in the implementation process, view and experience WBL and its actual functioning to enhance school-to-work transitions for students with intellectual disabilities. Drawing on 13 interviews with teachers working as supervisors and coordinators in the WBL training, our findings lead to three main conclusions. First, the teachers had significant reliance on WBL and its potential to prepare students for the labor market. Second, the teachers hesitated with regard to whether and to what extent WBL actually enhances school-to-work transitions. Third, the WBL reform has had significant negative effects on the working conditions of the supervising teachers involved. Our study uncovers a number of barriers for WBL to function as an actual bridge to work for students with intellectual disabilities, which we argue have important messages to bring for both policy and practice.

Keywords: School-to-work transitions, intellectual disabilities, special needs upper-secondary school, Sweden, workplace-based learning, interview data

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Having a job, or being employed, is commonly known to have a number of positive effects. First, it contributes to increased independence and a sense of meaningfulness, which serves as a social marker for citizenship (Sainsbury & Coleman-Fountain, 2013). Second, entering the workforce, a transition considered to provide prerequisites for social inclusion, contributes heavily to financial autonomy and to

the development of stable adult identities and is a social determinant of health (Ellenkamp et al., 2016). Third, work has strong symbolic values linked to conceptions of normality and moral worth; having a job and being economically self-sufficient is viewed as a key element for recognition in society and is desirable by most individuals and the state.

Although policies and regulations in Sweden support the right of people with disabilities to work and highlight access to employment as a priority, people with disabilities continue to lose out in employment against other citizens (Statistics Sweden, 2019). This is especially the case for people with intellectual disabilities (Arvidsson et al., 2015) who are still largely unable to access the support they need to participate fully in the labor market, despite various employment strategies put into practice. For instance, competitive employment has been subsidized with up to 80% wage levels to employers, and supported employment is available as a work transition strategy. Nevertheless, for people with intellectual disabilities in Sweden, sheltered employment is the most common employment option, i.e. work programs for those who are eligible for support and benefits but not able to work in a competitive employment setting. While these circumstances are firmly identified and established both in research and society, little is known about the types of actions or initiatives implemented to enhance labor market participation among people with intellectual disabilities (Swedish Social Insurance Agency, 2017). Consequently, there have been calls for more research on the design and effectiveness of transitional programs for people with intellectual disabilities and for improved coordination of agencies to achieve better outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities graduating from school (Beresford, 2004; Hudson, 2006; Shier et al., 2009; Winn & Hay, 2009).

This study aims to respond to the call for research on transitional programs contributing up-to-date findings on the recent implementation of a school-to-work transition initiative in special needs upper-secondary schools in Sweden. As stated above, students with intellectual disabilities face harsh discrepancies between the desire to be employed and available opportunities (Reine et al., 2016). It follows that exclusion from the labor force is one of the major explanatory factors behind the low income of people with intellectual disabilities. Despite a long history of legislation promoting school-to-work transitions, students with intellectual disabilities continue to be employed at lower rates when becoming adults compared to people without disabilities (Lindsay, 2011; Gold et al., 2013; Cease-Cook et al., 2015). This is an important issue to address given that programs including work placements have been widely recognized as an effective means of equipping people with both generic and job-relevant skills by combining learning and work (Kuczera & Jeon, 2019). It also offers empirical evidence that has a potential to provide

knowledge regarding the process of school-to-work transitions for students with intellectual disabilities.

In Sweden, a primary goal for the special needs upper-secondary school is to provide each student the opportunity to prepare for establishment in the labor market (National Agency of Education, 2016). To meet this goal, the Swedish government has created Workplace-Based-Learning (WBL) for the students concerned in order to improve school-to-work transitions and increase their chances of getting a job. The WBL implementation responds to previous research that indicates that the form of in-school training as WBL exemplifies, has proven to be beneficial for school-to-work transitions and that the educational level of persons with disabilities is one of the most important predictors of employment (Simonsen & Neubert, 2013; Siperstein et al., 2014; Wehman, et al., 2015; Bliksvær, 2018). What is new with the initiative of 2013 is that, through WBL, a student's placement is primarily based on a learning plan with aims and objectives, which the student and supervisors at workplaces and at the school – the latter being the most responsible for observing and assessing the student's progress – have agreed to. The supervising teachers are in an important position in this process of school-to-work transition in matching, monitoring, and assessing students, which serves as the motivation for this study.

The primary aim for special needs upper-secondary schools for students with intellectual disabilities is to “provide students with intellectual disabilities a customized education that will provide a good basis for gainful employment and further studies as well as for personal development and active participation in society” (Education Act, 2010, chapter 18, section 2). Given these aspirations, WBL is assumed to enhance students' career-readiness and to improve post-school outcomes by making them aware of labor market demands, their own strengths and weaknesses, and what are regarded as socially adequate identities as employees (Carter et al., 2011; Test et al., 2009). The significance of the roles that teachers play in providing, supporting, and monitoring school-to-work transition initiatives such as WBL cannot be overstated. For this reason, this study sought to identify supervising teachers' views and experiences of working actively with WBL based on the following research questions:

RQ 1: What characterizes teachers' views on the recent WBL reform in special needs upper-secondary schools in Sweden?

RQ 2: What characterizes teachers' views of WBL as a means to enhance school-to-work transitions for students in this type of school?

RQ 3: How and with what consequences has the WBL implementation changed the working conditions among supervising teachers?

Background: the Educational System in Sweden

In recent decades, the Swedish educational enterprise, as well as the public sectors more generally, has transformed from being governed by rules to managing according to goals and results (Persson, 2008). The previously centralized school system has been replaced with a system in which the state sets goals and local stakeholders (municipalities and individual schools) decide on how to implement activities in order to meet these goals (Göransson et al., 2011). In Sweden, the special needs upper-secondary school represents an independent form of schooling targeted towards students who are unable to meet the requirements of upper-secondary school because of an intellectual disability.

Two recent changes are crucial to acknowledge for the context of inquiry in this study because they have come to affect special needs upper-secondary schools, namely the new Education Act (2010) and the 2013 reformation of the special needs upper-secondary school (SOU 2011). The intentions of the reform were manifold – to increase community fellowship and participation, to increase the collaboration between upper-secondary schools and special needs upper-secondary schools, to equalize the education by creating new structures for national programs, to provide flexibility by meeting the needs of every student, to provide good preparation for working life, and to give meaning to adult life by getting a profession (prop. 2011/12:50). Strong emphasis was put on knowledge and learning more related to labor market demands. The Education Act (2010) stipulates that education must be of equal value across the country as well as across the different school forms. This means that students have the right to education of equal standard, irrespective of location or school form. An important effect of implementing the new Education Act was that the target group entitled to special needs upper-secondary school changed to include only students with an intellectual disability or acquired brain damage (2010:800, chapter 29, section 8). Another essential change with the reform in 2013 was that it transformed the program structure and introduced nine national programs and replaced former Workplace-Based-Education with Workplace-Based-Learning (WBL) for students in national programs.

The basic idea with WBL is to provide students the opportunity to put theory into practice with work experiences and to provide possibilities to explore within a real-world context what they have learned in the classroom. Students should spend a minimum of 22 weeks of the education at workplaces with an assigned supervisor. This will provide them with vocational skills and teach them the vocational culture and how to become part of the community at a workplace (SOU, 2011). Furthermore, WBL is considered to provide students with a sense of

future career aspirations and to extend their opportunities to reflect on what to do, or not to do, after graduation.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research on school-to-work transitions for students with intellectual disabilities shows a gap between educational initiatives and workforce outcomes. This has been identified in empirical studies on schools and labor market stakeholders (e.g., employers), studies on students' own conceptions of school-to-work transitions, and studies on attempts to bridge the well-known difficulties in these transition processes (Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Groce, 2004; Lindsay et al., 2015;). Research further identifies that a lack of work and employment preparation represents a main obstacle for entering the labor market for students with disabilities (e.g., Engelbrecht, et al., 2017). According to Roggero et al. (2006), such limitations within the educational systems – namely the inability to prepare and qualify students with disabilities – provide employers with justification for discrimination against such groups of students (Båtevik & Myklebust, 2006; Butcher & Wilton, 2008).

Research further recognizes social security systems, most evident in the western world, as a constraint to people (youths) with disabilities being employed. Engelbrecht et al. (2017) conclude that recipients of disability benefits run the risk of losing benefits if they become employed. Consequently, they may consider alternative sheltered career opportunities (Roulstone, 2002; Olsen, 2009). These results partly correlate with research on workforce policies on employment participation for people with intellectual disabilities. One empirical analysis from the UK, US, and Australia (Harris et al., 2012) demonstrates that such policies tend to endorse an individualized model of citizenship. Consequently, political and organizational forces, as well as social and economic conditions, remain overlooked in strategies to enhance work inclusion among people with disabilities. Not surprisingly, this individualization of citizenship has maintained the marginalization of people with disabilities in the labor market (Eide & Ingstad, 2013; Engelbrecht et al., 2016; Parker & Cass, 2005).

In her systematic overview of theoretical perspectives embedded in research on school-to-work transitions of people with disabilities, Eisenman (2003, p. 99 ff.) concludes that a deeper understanding of these transitions can be obtained by researching three analytical levels. The first includes the examination of structures relative to other structures, e.g. educational systems (organizations) in relation to values and policies on school-to-work initiatives. The second level of analysis examines fields within fields, e.g., relationships, values, and procedures among actors within and across the context of school-to-work transitions. This middle level of analysis is major because it puts

emphasis on the relationship between (transitions to) employment and pervasive social structures associated with differential treatment and outcomes in the education system, such as ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and disabilities. Eisenman's third analytic level examines backgrounds, experiences, and dispositions of, for example, students, families, teachers, and supervisors as they interact within a given field, such as education and school-to-work transitions (e.g., WBL).

This study responds primarily to Eisenman's first level by both positioning and discussing our empirical findings in relation to legal documents and policies (e.g., Education Act, 2010; SOU 2011). We also make use of Eisenman's second level by analyzing how disability relates to supervising teachers' working conditions relative to external interests, primarily employers and policy documents. In a forthcoming paper, we will move on to scrutinize and compare teachers' experiences with the experiences of employer representatives and professionals in the Swedish public employment services (*Arbetsförmedlingen*) working with the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities.

METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

The data consist of 13 interviews with nine male and four female teachers working as supervisors and coordinators in the WBL training at special needs upper-secondary schools. In the following, we just use the term "teachers" when referring to the participants of our study. At the interview occasion in 2018, all of them were employed at schools situated in five municipalities located in three counties in northern Sweden. Even though the data are limited both by the number of participants and by the selection of teachers from this area of Sweden, the information collected is comprehensive enough to draw conclusions from, as indicated below, by our use of the saturation criterion. While the teachers that we targeted may represent a positive selection and may not be representative for all teachers in Sweden involved with WBL at special needs upper-secondary schools, it will become evident that the research participants had both positive and negative views and experiences regarding WBL and that we could identify general patterns in the interview data for answering the three main research questions of this study.

Data Collection

After careful planning of the research and after obtaining the ethical permission to conduct it, we applied purposive sampling of teachers. The solid networks with schools and teachers established by the first author through his previous research benefited the data collection in terms of identifying potential teachers whom he contacted by phone and e-mail. Upon their approval, the interviews were booked in advance (minimum two weeks), and subsequently conducted through Skype for Business. By then we had decided on the research issues to address

and created the interview guide after some revisions taking into account two pilot interviews we performed to test and assess the interview guide. Our revisions concerned adding a few questions and modifying the order of the questions. Every teacher who got an invitation to take part in this study agreed to participate and to have the interview recorded.

The data were collected jointly. While the first author was leading the interview, the second author was taking notes. The interviews lasted from 25 to 90 minutes and were conducted and analyzed during the spring and fall of 2018. We used semi-structured interview questions to obtain information on how the teachers viewed the WBL reform and their experiences of implementing it in everyday working life. Because this is the first analysis out of a series of studies, not all the data from the interviews are examined below, just the questions and responses corresponding with the purpose of this paper. Thus, the interview data we focus on concern how teachers perceive the intentions/ideas behind the WBL reform, their experiences of working with the WBL in practice, and the possible means they suggest for improving it.

We decided to perform the interviews by Skype because it saved time for both us and the teachers and avoided paying for transportation costs. Such online interviewing was possible because the issues being addressed were professional, not personal, and did not require prolonged engagement. Furthermore, Skype interviews facilitated the recording and transcription of all the information gathered, providing us more time for the actual analysis. We stopped the collection when saturation of the data was achieved, in other words, when new participants did not add any new information. Consequently, we ended up with 13 interviews in total. The names of the participants are pseudonyms.

Method of Analysis

The methods used to analyze our data fall into descriptive techniques, as we used a qualitative approach to explore the content in the interviews. Our method for analysis was primarily data-driven and inspired by Braun and Clark's (2006) approach for thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis is not bounded by theoretical commitments and is a useful research tool to study people's experiences by identifying, analyzing, and reporting recurrent patterns, i.e. themes, within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mayring, 2000). In our case, the analysis involved a back and forth movement across interviews, ending up in the themes presented in the findings section. The first step in the analysis was to transcribe the data into written form. Second, the first author read the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the breadth and depth of the data and marked units of interest and meaning associated with the three research questions. These units/codes were put together to form themes. The constructed

themes were subsequently reviewed and checked by the co-authors for suitability in relation to shared similar meanings given the three research questions. The essence of each theme was identified and then labeled. It would have been possible to generate more themes, but our chosen level of abstraction enabled the identification of what were clearly different aspects of the respondents' views and experiences of WBL associated with the aim of the study. Finally, the most descriptive quotes were selected to illustrate the teachers' responses in accordance with the three themes corresponding with the three research questions.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was granted from the Regional Ethics Board in Umeå (2018/130-31). Before the interview took place, each participant was notified about the aim of the research and that they were guaranteed anonymity during the data analysis and dissemination of results. Each of them was further informed about their right to cancel their participation in this study at any time without giving any reason.

FINDINGS

This article seeks to understand and analyze perceptions and experiences of WBL in special needs upper-secondary schools in Sweden. Drawing on the 13 interviews with the teachers, our findings are structured in accordance with the three research questions. Findings indicate that the teachers supported 'the idea' of WBL, but this idea was not considered easy to translate into practical solutions, nor able to increase the likelihood of obtaining employment for their students. Before engaging in our three sub-sections, it should be noted that many, if not all, respondents followed approximately the same narrative when it came to the pros and cons of WBL.

Teachers' Views on Workplace-Based Learning

Our findings indicate that the teachers had significant reliance on WBL and a broadly shared sense of a strategic need to improve school-to-work transitions among students with intellectual disabilities. Virtually all respondents took a positive stance on WBL, depicting it as "urgent", "important", "valuable", etc. These descriptions were often related to insights on the marginalized position among students with intellectual disabilities now being provided with knowledge and experiences of different career options. Our findings further suggest that two main themes characterized the respondents' perceptions concerning the role of WBL in special needs upper-secondary schools: 1) it provided learning opportunities for students through real-life experiences, and 2) it helped them to acquire adequate skills relevant for labor market demands.

First, the WBL was commonly viewed as representing 'reality' and thus providing students with 'real-life' experiences enabling them to engage in 'real assignments' and to become acquainted with the demands and cultures of the labor market by attending various workplaces. The following two teachers quotes illustrate this view:

[WBL]. . . is all about real work assignments, then you have set the bar high and the students feel that this is for real. I think that things being for real is extremely important. (Rasmus)

It is very important for them to get into the labor market and its culture because the culture here at school is very different. It is good for them to see a real-life workplace, what is required, what needs to be done, and what you need to think about, responsibilities, etc. I believe these issues are very important. (Ruben)

These real-life experiences were considered especially important for students with intellectual disabilities because the respondents viewed the students' insights on vocational career choices and their cognitive disposition as limited, which was considered to negatively affect their career aspirations. The role of WBL in changing these potential outcomes is apparent in the following quote:

This is their first contact with the labor market and all that comes with that, such as colleagues, schedules, rules, and norms, but also obligations and rights. . . Students at special needs upper-secondary schools generally have difficulties in understanding instructions, images, or metaphors. They need to see things in practice. That is why WBL is positive, because it provides opportunities to leave school and meet the real world. For our students, it is actually a kind of preparation for the future. (Hilda)

Real-life experiences and being able to engage in actual work assignments was considered to have other positive outcomes. For example, the respondents considered WBL placements to provide students with vocational identities and to help them obtain a 'self-image as a member of the workforce' and to 'grow as individuals' while also providing them with a sense of being a 'contributing citizen'.

Second, our findings show that WBL enhances students' abilities to acquire skills relevant for labor market demands. In particular, our findings show two recurrent types of skills considered important to achieve in order to meet these demands, namely vocational skills and social skills. Vocational skills are primarily acquired by combining learning with work and practical assignments through WBL, which our respondents viewed as an effective strategy to equip students with adequate labor market skills in line with their career aspirations:

The idea is that they learn a lot. . . what it is all about working as a janitor. They participate in the daily work, first to see and learn and gradually to work more and

more independently and finally to become fairly self-sufficient. (Mats)

However, although both types of skills are evident from the interviews, it appears that the teachers put stronger emphasis on generic and socially oriented skills compared to vocational skills by referring to students being able to “be on time”, “wear the right clothes”, “bring a lunchbox”, and other codes of a responsible employee. That social skills such as these were considered important factors to increase the likelihood of obtaining employment for students with intellectual disabilities is evident from the following two quotes:

I think that social awareness is important for them [students] to learn... becoming part of new environments, to be confident with others, have the courage to speak with other people, be able to participate in coffee breaks... that is very difficult for our students, for instance lunch or coffee breaks, or other events with no real structures... Where do I sit? Who should I speak to? What should I do? Where do I eat my food? Am I supposed to stand in line for heating up my food? All these aspects are very important. (Kaisa)

I mean, you need all these social competences. You need to come to work on time, you always have to do your best, take your own initiative, and be as independent as possible so you don't need supervision all the time. That's what it's all about. (John)

While the respondents thought that these competences were a prerequisite for students being viewed as “employable”, they also provided accounts on how such acquired social skills have had successful – in other words, inclusive – outcomes at the workplace. The following quote is an example:

Knowledge increases as they [students] get older. I have a student in the fourth year in mind who has really come a long way. It is like day and night. Back then [first year] he didn't really say anything, but now he is so verbal... it's just amazing seeing him in the workplace... how he talks and jokes around with the others... He has really become one of the gang there. (Helena)

Teachers' Views on WBL as a Means to Enhance School-to-Work Transitions

According to policymakers, the goal of WBL is to provide students with vocational skills, the ability to learn vocational cultures, and the ability to become part of the community through a workplace in order to enhance the students' chances to enter the labor market (SOU 2011:8). As demonstrated above, the interviewed teachers expressed significant reliance on WBL as well because of its benefits for students with intellectual disabilities. However, concerning the question of to what extent WBL enhances the school-to-work transition, the respondents were more hesitant. Despite the good intentions of WBL, the labor market prospects for students with intellectual disabilities

remained limited according to the teachers, and they regarded the labor market as increasingly inaccessible for students with intellectual disabilities. Our findings show that employer attitudes and high labor market demands are the two predominant reasons for this being the case.

First, most employers are unaware or have limited knowledge of students or people with intellectual disabilities or of special needs upper-secondary schools. The respondents identified this as one obstacle for improving students' possibilities for entering the labor market. For instance, they stated that employers were often “afraid” or “hesitant” or demonstrated a “lack of awareness” and “general lack of knowledge” or insecurity about how to “deal with the students' special needs”. The respondents saw that these views among employers could potentially reinforce stereotypes of people with intellectual disabilities as poor job performers, consequently representing a barrier for school-to-work transitions. Simultaneously, the teachers argued that direct experiences of and contact with students – in combination with information and help to raise awareness – hold the potential to reduce such stereotypical perception of students. The following more-detailed accounts, address these issues:

The first time I talked to the members of the board of culture and recreation (*kultur- och fritidsnämnden*), they told me that lack of time made it impossible to take on people with intellectual disabilities. That it was impossible because of all the travelling around. ‘Ok, but let's wait a second, this is what it's about...’ I said. These are all students in the *national* programs, and you can't even see that they have an intellectual disability; they are just like everyone else at that age. When it comes to practical tasks, they are sometimes even more competent than other youths. ‘Aha, is that so...’, the board members responded. So, I mean, it is all about lack of knowledge. (Rasmus)

They [employers] are somewhat cautious... and just the word *special needs school* worries them. I frequently visit employers and inform them about WBL and, as smoothly as possible, finish up by saying these are students from special needs upper-secondary schools... but that they are functioning really well as long as they receive the help they need. But you know, by then half of them [employers] have backed out... so I mean, it is not easy to match. (Tim)

Second, increased labor market demand was viewed as another reason why WBL fails to enhance school-to-work transitions for students with intellectual disabilities. Although the responses related to the first research question stressed the positive side in that the WBL can provide students with adequate vocational and social skills, the teachers were still hesitant about students' actual ability to meet the requirements of the labor market. The respondents recurrently commented upon labor market changes, referring to increased demands for highly trained and efficient workers. In terms of employers' expectations,

the foremost concern was related to productivity and efficiency. According to the teachers, the ability to meet the complexity of many jobs in the current labor market was one aspect that employers take into account, and this was perceived as a major barrier to employment for people and/or students with intellectual disabilities due to their limited cognitive resources. The teachers further recognized that executive functioning for students with intellectual disabilities – independence, organization, establishing routines, etc. – is difficult. The complex relationship between labor market demands and individual prerequisites among the students was recurrently echoed in the interview data, as the following two excerpts demonstrate:

Today you need to be quick-witted and self-sufficient basically from day one. Particularly in the private sector, where slim organizations are needed in order to be profitable. There is basically no space nor need for supervisors, which the students may need, at least in the beginning. I mean, people with intellectual disabilities have a long startup time; it takes time before they have found their role [at the workplace]. I feel there is no such time and no such resources available. . . the expectations are set far too high already from the start. (Hilda)

Everything has become so efficient today, and people getting hired need to be very flexible and efficient at work. This group [people with intellectual disabilities] is not very fast and they need support. . . I mean, everything is supposed to be so efficient and cost-effective. . . (Mats)

That this challenge in school-to-work transitions has become even greater becomes evident when the teachers reflected upon changes in the students' general knowledge and resources since the WBL reform in 2013, as the following quote illustrates:

We are dealing with a different group of students today, a group having limited resources. More resourceful students don't see themselves as belonging to special needs upper-secondary schools because students there are much weaker today. It may sound harsh, but already in the first or second year we can see that this will be tough. . . entering the labor market I mean. (Hilda)

The respondents thus acknowledged that the student population has changed since the reform in 2013. As discussed above (see background section), the changes in the Education Act (2010) limited the target group entitled to special needs upper-secondary school to only include students with intellectual disabilities. Together with a documented propensity that students with mild forms of intellectual disability today tend to select upper-secondary school programs, this change has led to cognitively less resourceful students in the national programs in special needs upper-secondary schools (National Agency of Education, 2016). Thus, the remaining students in special

needs upper-secondary schools are less equipped to meet the demands and expectations of the labor market.

Implementation of WBL and Changed Working Conditions for Supervising Teachers

The next question to address is how the new reform from 2013 has affected the working conditions according to teachers actively working to implement it. The interview results show that the WBL implementation has increased the workload and administrative responsibilities for the teachers; they are expected to be more actively involved throughout the whole implementation process than before. Their involvement includes introducing the concept of WBL to new workplaces, establishing and maintaining ties with employers, and monitoring and evaluating students throughout the whole process. One of the most predominant tasks in the respondents' increased workload is finding new and diverse workplaces. They viewed this assignment as particularly challenging given the time spent visiting or calling employers to promote the idea of WBL and the characteristics of the students in order to acquire a new workplace.

It is extremely challenging to find workplaces. . . we visit employers and workplaces on a regular basis. With some [employers] we have had an agreement [WBL] for some time, and we try hard to keep up a good relationship. But finding new places is difficult. (Kaisa)

This searching seems to increase as teachers constantly have to "compete" for workplaces with other groups of students, e.g., industrial programs, introduction programs, and apprentice positions, and "unfortunately, employers tend to pick them first" (Tim). The teachers reported that students with intellectual disabilities face difficulties competing with other groups. Tim's words are representative for the teachers who recurrently mentioned the challenge of overcoming the stigma associated with "intellectual disabilities" and "special needs upper-secondary schools" when interacting with employers at potential workplaces.

Our findings further show that insufficient coordination and a lack of formal guidelines regarding the WBL placements have added to the teachers' workload. No organization or agency is responsible for providing placements and matching students accordingly, leaving the teachers with the responsibility of making successful arrangements. One teacher framed this dilemma as follows:

I would like to see a more clear organization around WBL and more detailed descriptions on how to operationalize the aims in a given course into specific work assignments so that things becomes clearer and no one needs to hesitate. It would bring certainty both to supervisors and students. (Johanna)

The increased workload for the teachers (struggling to find workplaces, raising awareness, and insufficient

guidelines) has led to some adverse consequences for the WBL placements, one of which we call “narrow labor market experiences”. This refers to a risk that WBL placements are insufficiently matched with students’ programs and future career aspirations. Because these placements are expected to take place within the scope of students’ national programs (e.g. healthcare, hospitality, handicrafts, etc.), the teachers considered workplaces outside that scope as inadequate, consequently increasing the competition for the few workplaces available. The scarcity of workplaces seems to have created an inclination among the teachers to let students remain at the same workplace, making it difficult to offer students broader insights into various sectors/areas of the labor market. Some teachers felt ambiguous about students’ need for repetition, which implies staying in the same workplace, and their need for insights into different workplace cultures, which implies recurrently changing WBL placements. This somewhat paradoxical dilemma is illustrated in the following quote:

It is a problem finding workplaces that match each students’ choice of education... offering them WBL placements of good quality that are also within the scope of their national programs and future career choices is not always possible. (Tor)

The matching-dilemma was a recurrent theme among the teachers in addition to the trouble with finding workplaces at all and the lack of sufficient guidelines. The reform in 2013 stressed that supervising teachers should also be responsible for carrying out quality monitoring throughout a WBL placement, especially focusing on students’ performances and outcomes. This new responsibility has added to the teachers’ workload. Noteworthy, and a reflection of their amount of discretion and the lack of sufficient guidelines (see previous section), is the diversity in what the teachers viewed as essential aspects to assess and evaluate during WBL placements. As with the two types of skills described above in the first empirical section, two main competence areas for teachers to evaluate are students’ vocational skills and social/collegial abilities. The first set of skills is formal and mainly rooted in policy and the jurisdictional stipulations of WBL activities, while the second set is more informal and predominantly linked to commonly held views on how to be and socially interact as a colleague and an adult. Although the new Education Act (2010:800) reform emphasizes the importance of providing students with vocational skills, the respondents in this study seem to have a significant amount of discretion to assess and evaluate not only vocational skills, but also behaviors, aspirations, and social skills. To a direct question on what they viewed as important areas to evaluate during WBL placements, the teachers addressed primarily socially oriented skills, including “ability to communicate”, ability to function with co-workers”, “if the take instructions”,

“being self-governing”, and being “honest”, “responsible”, “loyal”, and “flexible”.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study contributes valuable knowledge to the questions of whether and how changes in the vocational education policy in Sweden have led to changes in practice in special needs upper-secondary schools. The main findings can be summarized into three conclusions.

First, the teachers had significant reliance on WBL and its ability to prepare students for the labor market, and WBL was considered crucial to be successful in enhancing school-to-work transitions among students with intellectual disabilities. Our findings indicate two main reasons for why teachers view WBL as important – it can bring about learning opportunities through real-life experiences, and it can help students acquire skills relevant for meeting labor market demands.

Second, the teachers hesitated with regard to whether and to what extent WBL actually enhances school-to-work transitions and increases the chances for students with intellectual disabilities to enter the competitive labor market. The students’ prospects to do so were perceived as limited, and the teachers further regarded the labor market as increasingly inaccessible. Two main reasons for this were apparent from the interviews – employers’ lack of knowledge and awareness (on intellectual disabilities and special needs upper-secondary schools) and high labor market demands that students with intellectual disabilities in this particular school are unable to meet

Third, our findings demonstrate that the implementation of the WBL reform in 2013 has had significant effects on the working conditions of the supervising teachers involved. Their increased workload reflects an apparent discrepancy; they are expected to take a more active role throughout the whole WBL process (matching, monitoring, evaluating, etc.), while at the same time experiencing insufficient guidelines. Moreover, the responsibility to find (and maintain) workplaces – in competition with other categories of students – and having to deal with employers’ attitudes and lack of awareness of intellectual disabilities have further contributed to the teachers’ workload. This helps explain why teachers when assessing a placement as successful or not, commonly defined as having responsive (workplace) supervisors, adequate job assignments, satisfied students, etc., were likely to recruit the same workplace for students’ future WBL periods. Our study suggests that this has “lock-in” effects for students and narrows their preparation for labor market demands because they rarely experience cultural norms or job tasks at different workplaces. Consequently, supervising teachers find themselves in a delicate situation of having to balance the needs and resources among students with intellectual disabilities. Their ambitions to offer insights into a broad view of labor

market cultures encounter a challenging reality in terms of lack of workplaces, lack of guidelines, and, finally, labor market prejudices on intellectual disabilities and special needs upper-secondary schools (Roggero et al., 2006; Båtevik & Myklebust, 2006; Butcher & Wilton, 2008).

Our main findings and conclusions are understandable against the somewhat paradoxical development in Sweden since the reform in 2013. The reform has put stronger emphasis on vocational skills and school-to-work transitions for student in special needs upper-secondary schools. However, the reform also stipulated that the target group entitled to special needs upper-secondary school is exclusively students with intellectual disability, which has fundamentally changed the group studying in this school form (SOU 2011:8). Although the teachers recognized the potential and the relevance of WBL, they acknowledged that their students today are less equipped and have lower prerequisite skills for entering the labor market than before. This parallel development seems to be one explanatory factor for the increased workload among supervising teachers.

When interpreting the study results, some limitations should be kept in mind, one of which is the limited empirical data. Inevitably, this reduces the ability to generalize these findings to wider populations of students and teachers concerned with WBL in Sweden or similar educational programs abroad. However, we think that many teachers will recognize the results of our study. Another limitation is that our study only reports findings from supervising teachers, and it does not include any experiences or views from employers or students themselves, both of which are main stakeholders in the process of school-to-work transitions. However, in two upcoming studies we will exclusively focus on these two groups and will make comparisons to the results presented here.

All in all, this study contributes to the growing body of research on school-to-work transitions for people with intellectual disabilities and on educational initiatives that attempt to bridge the well-known difficulties in these transition processes (Groce, 2004; Lindsay et al., 2015; Engelbrecht et al., 2017). Somewhat surprising is that our findings indicate two external factors for why students with intellectual disabilities face difficulties entering the labor market – employer attitudes and increased labor market demands. These findings add to previous research that has primarily focused on more internal limitations within the educational system, such as lack of work and employment preparation of students (Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Roggero et al., 2006), education, training/socialization, and the role of teachers/supervisors (Marsay, 2014; Wehmeyer, et al., 2000). Therefore, the findings and conclusions in this study contain important messages for both policy and practice. While the intention of the WBL reform is highly appreciated by teachers, who play one key role in implementing it in

practice, our study uncovers a great number of barriers that remain to be overcome in order for WBL to function as an actual bridge to work for students with intellectual disabilities. Such results can help policy makers to assess the reforms and to modify them accordingly to improve teachers' working conditions, enhance school-to-work transitions, and increase the employment possibilities among students with intellectual disabilities.

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