

Vocational Training: An Educational Model for Transitioning Youths With and Without Disabilities from School to Work in Sweden

Lena Logan

Jacksonville, Florida

Patrick L. Dunn

University of Tennessee

This article will discuss the Swedish educational system for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, with a focus on transitioning youths and vocational training programs. The pro-active approach to job readiness in Swedish secondary special education school is described.

Educational programs to obtain vocational training for individuals with intellectual disabilities during high school years have not been a priority for many countries until the International Labor Organization and United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2008. During this convention new provisions were put in to force. One of these new provisions would engage many countries in new discussions how to enhance education for individuals with intellectual disabilities, and how to provide greater vocational training choices in an inclusive setting (Parmenter, 2011).

Sweden, with a population of only 10 million people and generous social supports for individuals with disabilities, provides more extensive community-based vocational programs and choices in the secondary school setting than what is currently provided in the United States. Vocational education and transition from school to work are very broad and complex topics. The Swedish vocational system differs in many ways to that of United States. One such difference is the variety of comprehensive programs that are available to students with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Students that have the cognitive ability to participate in comprehensive vocational education will have the opportunity to engage in four years of classroom and hands-on training. During these years, students will participate in not only vocational training in a classroom setting, but will also receive hands-on training in a real life community setting for

a minimum of 25 weeks. To make this form of education available to all, students that live too far away from their local school will receive government aid, for housing, so that they are able to live at, or near the school. Once students have completed their vocational education and are seeking employment, the Swedish federal employment agency will provide services, similar but more comprehensive than those of Vocational Rehabilitation Services. This paper discusses the broad outlines of the Swedish system for vocational training and transition from school to work, with contrast provided to the system present in the United States where relevant.

The Philosophical Foundations of the Swedish Educational Model

The Swedish education law guarantees and encourages a suitable individualized education plan that will allow all children to gain knowledge in core subjects, arts, and physical education. To achieve these ends, primary and secondary schools encourage and include curricula that promote a lifelong desire for learning through best practice theory. These Curricula also convey and anchor respect for human rights, the foundations of democratic values that Swedish society is founded upon. The educational curriculum is intended to be aligned with the belief of sanctity, individual freedom, equal rights and solidarity between all citizens. Every student also has the right to develop so-

cial skills and social skills training in a community-based setting and no students should be excluded from any activities due to his or her disability (Skolverket, n.d.). All curriculum and learning consider each child's ability and needs, with the intention that all children are given the best and appropriate accommodation so they can gain knowledge and develop to their fullest potential. Differentiation should take place where Universal Learning Design is embedded in each curriculum and lesson. Furthermore, the Swedish educational system includes learning that focuses on each child's personal development in order to produce creative, competent, and responsible citizens. Furthermore, regardless of their geographical location, socioeconomic level, race, or primary language, each student should have equal access to full time free compulsory education that is evidence-based and shown to be result-driven for all students. (Skollagen, 2010).

Student-Centered Education

More recent developments have led to philosophical changes in the teaching model that have had an impacted participation in education, especially special education, in the recent past. Perhaps most significantly, in the last 15 years, Swedish schools have changed from being staff-controlled to student-centered, which may give one explanation to the 100 percent increase in special education enrollment in Sweden over the last 10 years. Students are now encouraged to be self-advocates and are included in any decision making about their educational path. (Molin, 2008, p. 199)

Education in Primary Language

Students whose primary language is not Swedish, and Swedish is not spoken as the primary language in their home, previously had the right to receive primary language instruction during school hours until recently, but this is no longer guaranteed by law, as the Swedish educational system struggles to keep up with the demand of the approximately one hundred different languages spoken in Swedish schools today due to the high influx of immigrants and refugees. Today, students whose primary language is not Swedish have a right to have all standardized tests administered in their primary language. All other testing, student materials and parent communications should be translated for each student needs. Due to the structure of the written law, it is at the discretion of each school district to provide materials (but not necessarily instruction) in the language in which students are most proficient. (P. Wallenkrans, personal communication, November, 2016).

Special Education Law and Settings

All students, regardless of any developmental and/or intellectual disabilities has the right to gain knowledge to their greatest ability in a setting that is designed to allow students to acquire knowledge in the most effective and suitable way. Parents or guardians and school authority have to come to a written agreement to where the best educational setting may be for students (Skolverket, n.d.). This does not mean that students are automatically guaranteed education in an environment that is considered to be least restrictive. In United States, the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is the requirement in federal law that students with disabilities receive their education, to the maximum extent appropriate, with nondisabled peers and that special education students are not removed from regular classes unless, even with supplemental aids and services, education in regular classes cannot be achieved satisfactorily" (20 U.S.C. §1412(a)(5)(A); 34 C.F.R. §300.114).

The Swedish philosophy behind "least restrictive environment" was reconsidered after research found many students did not benefit from such setting due to lack of resources, trained teachers and staff as well as higher student- teacher ratio. (P. Wallenkrans, personal communication, October 2016). In contrast, United States education law for individuals with disabilities (IDEA 2004) emphasizes LRE and special education teams at the state level must include a rationale why a student will not be placed in the least restrictive environment, and such decision will have to include extensive documentation and a lengthy process.

Swedish students that participate in the general education classroom receive services that are similar to special education settings in many other nations, including those of public schools in the United States. Students are supported in general education classrooms by the special education teacher as well as having segregated classes suited for specific populations. If it is deemed that there is a need for greater support, students would be enrolled in a special education school (*särskolan*), which ends in 9th grade. In more rural areas, students who are engaged in segregated special education may have to be placed in a boarding school due to excessive travel distances. The expense of the boarding school as well as weekend transportation to students' home is paid for by the local school system.

Transitioning to Vocational Training Programs

The Swedish educational system is based on the nine-year compulsory system, where the school years are divided into 3 segments: Elementary school, first to sixth grade; Middle school, seventh to ninth grade; and high school (gymnasium), tenth to thirteenth grade.

Students who start 10th grade in the general education setting do have the right to transition to special education if they lack the cognitive ability to progress further due to their disability. Parents and students should be informed of the limitations to special education may project on them later in life. It is important for students to understand that post-secondary education choices and careers will be more limited due to not being able to obtain a general diploma. This is very similar to the United States, where students who graduate with a special High school diploma, or Certificate of Completion, come to find that post-secondary educational choices are limited.

Combining Academic and Vocational Training

When students apply to special education in high school, an educational plan will be drafted in accordance with the student's cognitive abilities and vocational goals. All educational and vocational training is delivered in a slower paced setting, with fewer students, yet it includes a curriculum that challenges students while promoting a love of learning. Students that cannot initially decide on a specific vocational track may enter an introductory program that will allow exploration of educational or vocational paths while still earning educational credits. During this introductory semester, students are taught job-readiness skills that will help them prepare themselves for the general job-market and which may, in and of itself, evoke an interest in a specific career that will lead them to enter a specific vocational track. These specific vocational tracks fall under "National Programs" where the programs are not student-specific but rather follow a national curriculum and vocational track. Each of these 4-year programs will allow for students to gain in-depth knowledge in one of nine areas and allow for students to earn a vocational certificate in their chosen track once they pass their exit examination. The nine National Program options are tied to high-demand careers and include culinary arts with specialization in bakery/fine pastry; carpentry; construction; logistics; auto repair; healthcare; social work; and agriculture. Additional programs may also be available to students outside of the National Programs (Skolvarket, n.d.).

A student that enrolls in one specific program will have the option to change the field of study with in their first school year, if the program is deemed too difficult for the student or if the student would like to enter another field of choice. Students will also have the opportunity to take a one-year leave, to explore work options on their own. During this time, students may seek the help of the Swedish federally-funded and operated employment agency to locate a temporary job.

Community-Centered Vocational Training

Students that enroll in one of the national programs will participate in 2-years of hand-on community based internships in one or more locations. During students' 2-year internship term, they will continue to learn about their career in a classroom setting with the use of the Universal Learning Design theory. To reinforce learning; subjects taught in the classroom will be presented at the same time at their internship location. Students' individual ability level is always considered, and the Universal Learning design is also applied in the internship setting. During the schooling period, students are evaluated at their ability level, and no students should be excluded from the program due to their limitations.

To engage the community, the Swedish federal government and employment agency will, under certain circumstances, compensate employers for taking on the additional responsibility as an internship provider. There are also initiatives to create equal employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities, and many of the job accommodations that need to be put in place are subsidized by the government, to encourage employer involvement. For instance, the Swedish government encourages employers to hire individuals with a disability by giving tax breaks for money spent on accommodation, etc. The biggest incentive is up to two years of subsidized-wage employment (Arbetsformedlingen, n.d.). The federally-owned and operated employment agency (which provide services similar to those of Vocational Rehabilitation), includes support division dedicated to transitioning youths with disabilities that have graduated from a four-year program. Transitioning students will receive services from the employment agency where a person-centered support will focus on personal desires and goals. It is the goal of the employment agency to create a permanent placement in the student's previous internship location if desired. Through the implementation of state supported employment, new hires may apply to receive individual job-support, which includes job coaching, assistive technology training and specific training such as heavy equipment operation or safety training that lead to certifications. The mentioned support program is similar to that offered through state-federal Vocational Rehabilitation in the United States, but services are included under the general employment agency rather than a separate agency. An individual with disabilities that utilizes the Swedish federal employment agency to seek, obtain and maintain a job, will not have their case closed once a job placement has been deemed successful, but rather have the right for ongoing support and guidance with a job coach for as long as the employee believes this is necessary (Arbetsformedlingen.se).

Even with extensive career training through a four-year vocational program, individuals with disabilities have a higher unemployment rate than their non-disabled peers. Sweden's unemployment rate for non-disabled individuals lingers around the eight percent mark (2015), while the disabled community unemployment rate remains at about ten percent. (arbetsformedlingen.se, n.d.) In comparison, United States unemployment rate averages around 5.5 percent (2015) for the non-disabled community, and 11.7 percent for the disabled community (United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). These discrepancies may be due to differences in career preparation, attitudes concerning community inclusion, or other variables.

Students' Perspectives of Vocational Training Programs

Studies of special education students' views of vocational training tend to show that they have mixed feelings, especially in regard to community integration during and after completion of the training. Students praise the vocational training they received, but many feel that a segregated educational format sent them on a continuous path of segregation in society and workplace (Herou, 2015, p. 8). In a study conducted by Mineur (2013) Special education students look at their school and classmates as being part of society, but once they transition out of school, they have a difficult time connecting with other members of the community. Students, therefore, feel a great sense of disconnect and segregation. In a study by Tardif-Williams (2007), non-disabled students in inclusive education developed a more positive view of people with intellectual disabilities and this overall more positive attitude will create a more inclusive workplace. Students that have been part of the general education through 12th grade have a greater friendship circle to network with, and to receive support from. The support that is less segregated allows for a more positive and successful transition from school to independent working life (Herou, 2015, p. 8).

Individuals that have completed the vocational training program in the special education setting voice concern that they have difficulties with feeling part of and being included in the larger (non-disabled) community. Some students who graduate with a vocational certificate will develop their own strategies to be competitive in the general workforce, and many of these individuals feel very confident and competent in their job and place in life and society. However, some students do not feel accepted in general society due to the segregation during the school year, nor do they feel accepted as a general member of their workplace. The later mentioned individuals continue to have a friendship with their peers but do not feel included in the workforce but rather see their own disability as the norm in their minority group. Other young indi-

viduals with disabilities aim for being a "normal" adult, where they do not view their disability as part of their identity or feel that they are being viewed differently due to receiving support services and/or work related accommodations. These individuals try to play different roles depending on which social setting they are in. They can be the recipient of traditional social support, yet at the same time be a normal young community member. These separate roles are maybe difficult to differentiate and separate from as many struggles to leave their old title of "Special Education" behind when they enter young adult life and try to enter working life (Molin, 2008).

Sweden has been a trailblazer for community inclusion for individuals with intellectual, developmental and physical disabilities. At a time when racial segregation was still, in a practical sense, a largely unsettled issue in the United States, Bengt Nirje, published *The Normalization Principle*, where the "principle refers to a cluster of ideas, methods, and experiences expressed in practical work for the mentally retarded in the Scandinavian countries, as well as in some other parts of the world. "The normalization principle underlines demands for standards, facilities, and programs for the retarded as expressed by the Scandinavian parent movement" (Nirje, 1970, p. 62). The normalization principle is living document, where Sweden push for full inclusion in society, not only on in areas of social relations but also in the work place, and in recent years, inclusion for post-secondary education.

Post-Secondary Education: An Emerging Option

Sweden, despite being an early proponent of inclusive education for individuals with disabilities, has lagged in presenting opportunities for these learners in higher education settings. During the last decade, Universities in the United States have offered individualized transition college programs to individuals with intellectual disabilities, where students have the opportunity to participate in not only the academic programs of the university but may also have the opportunity to live on campus, to experience and grow from social atmosphere present on campus. College options for individuals with intellectual disabilities were not offered in Sweden until the fall of 2011, when University of Gävle in the central part of Sweden started their pilot program. In this program, eight students were able to take health science courses for special college credit during a three-year period, but no on-campus living arrangements were offered, as all classes were presented in an online format (Lararnastidning, n.d.).

The recent availability of university programs in Sweden may be an unintended consequence of the success of vocational training. This success may have led to a

belief that persons with disabilities do not need higher education to have a financially stable and fulfilling life. However, the continued push for community inclusion has led advocates to campaign for all institutions to be inclusive, including higher education classes delivered in both distance learning and an on-campus format to promote inclusion. Transitioning from Upper Secondary Programs to Working Life.

The Swedish Council for Social Sciences and Working life conducted a 2-year study on the belonging aspect after transitioning from school to working life for individuals with disabilities. In this study, Tideman (2004) looks at the new generation of transitional youth. Some of these newly graduated students reverted to the public welfare rolls, where they will be guaranteed a Social Security income due to their disability. This group of students did not see themselves as belonging to the community without carrying a special label of disabled. Other students, some of them who had reluctantly enter the vocational program and completed the program, where able to join the general job market, and then had a positive feeling of being included as a general member, not a special member of the community. (Molin, 2004, pp. 199-203). The students that completed the vocational programs and successfully entered a competitive job reported a sense of belonging, and experienced comfort, trust, fellowship, and pride, as well as belonging to a caring environment (Molin, 2004). It is further noted in the 2-year study, that many of the individuals that experienced successful employment and a feeling of acceptance and belonging also had the view that inclusion and success required individual effort. For those students that did not have a successful transition or feeling of being included as a general member of the community had a view that external forces, such as support staff, were determinative of their outcome.

Molin (2004) also noted that individuals that had a successful transition from training to work were able to connect with their employers by being aware and talking about their disability and functional limitations. Employers that were more willing to learn and understand a disability, and its affect on employee ability and performance where more willing to make accommodations for the employee. When employees were able to talk more in depth about their disability, they felt more connected to the work place and the employer Molin states, "Transitioning students will deal with inclusion and belonging in their own way, and each person will have his/her own need, definition and ways of coping with the identification process. Individuals cope with this by conducting themselves in and between concurrent identities but have to "deal with whether one should be *like* others or should be *with* others" (Molin, 2004, p. 205).

Conclusions

Even if Sweden has a social structure that is much more inclusive, where equality is stressed, individuals with disabilities still feel that there is much work create equal access for all. Even if the community applies and monitors all disability laws concerning access, accommodations, and equal opportunity, views of the disability community are not necessarily changed. It is not until the person, rather than the disability, is paramount, that we can move to the step of full inclusion. That is perhaps the greatest challenge not only to educational personnel, but to Swedish society in regard to persons with disabilities.

With all the money and resource put in to these programs, there is improvement but not optimum outcomes. Sweden and its communities, even with strong social support and being on the forefront of community inclusion, still struggle to find employment for individuals with disabilities. Further research and discussion are needed to find out what prevents a community from being more inclusive, where individuals with a disability see themselves as uniquely abled, not disabled.

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Author Notes

Patrick L. Dunn is an Associate Professor of Educational Psychology and Counseling at the University of Tennessee. Lena K. Logan is currently working as an Exceptional Student Education Teacher in the public education system in Jacksonville, Florida.