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Holistic Professional Competence, with Life Skills on the Agenda

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Abstract

Context: In 2020, Norway introduced new curricula that emphasized three cross-disciplinary themes: 1.) Health and Life Skills, 2.) Democracy and Citizenship, and 3.) Sustainable Development. This action research project, "Holistic Vocational Competence with Life Skills on the Agenda," aims to integrate life skills into vocational education to better prepare students for the dynamic demands of the labor market.

Approach: The project utilizes an action research methodology involving collaborative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection. Data collection methods include classroom observations, interviews, and logs. Teachers and researchers work together to develop, implement, and refine teaching practices that integrate life skills into vocational training.

Findings: Initial findings indicate that integrating life skills into vocational education enhances student engagement and competency development. Teachers report improved teaching practices and greater student participation. Preliminary data shows a positive impact on students' self-awareness, critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving skills.

Conclusions: The project aims to demonstrate that life skills can be effectively integrated into vocational education, leading to holistic student development and enhanced preparedness for future career challenges.

Keywords

action research, democratic processes, life skills, holistic professional competence

1 Introduction

In the autumn of 2020, new curricula were introduced in Norway that, in addition to subject-specific content, emphasize three cross-disciplinary themes: 1.) Health and Life Skills, 2.) Democracy and Citizenship, and 3.) Sustainable Development. According to the overarching part of the curriculum, these themes are to be integrated into teaching across subjects where relevant (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 13). These cross-disciplinary themes are not separate school subjects; instead, they are to be woven into comprehensive assignments, particularly in vocational education. This paper focuses on how Health and Life Skills encompass more than just mental health.

There is significant interest in these themes in secondary education, but there is a lack of research on their integration into holistic vocational training. This gap is the impetus for this planned action research set to begin in autumn 2024. The researchers will justify the need for further study within this field based on previous findings and elaborate on the chosen research approach. This paper will outline the background of the project, explore the theme of life skills



in education, discuss the methodology of action research and the chosen approach, and provide a preliminary project outline with methodological and theoretical justifications.

This action research project is grounded in Stortingsmelding 28 (Meld. St. 2015–2016). Stortingsmelding 28 (2015-2016), titled "Subjects – Specialization – Understanding: A Renewal of the Knowledge Promotion," is a white paper from the Norwegian government to the Parliament, focusing on reforming the Norwegian primary and secondary education system. The project is also grounded in findings from another project, our first in the LUSY project (OsloMet, 2024). LUSY is short for Lærerutdanningsskoler og lærerutdanningsbedrifter i Yrkesfaglærerutdanningen in Norwegian, or Teacher Education Schools in Vocational Teacher Education in English. The LUSY project addresses the development of an organizational theoretical and didactic model for collaboration between educational institutions and the field of practice, and the challenges and needs this involves. Our first project highlights the need for further research and collaboration across educational levels, universities, and secondary schools. The summary below provides an insight into our first LUSY project and its background, which aims to investigate how teachers work with life skills in schools through vocational pedagogical development work (Yrkespedagogisk Utviklingsarbeid - YPU). Using an action research method, we aim to contribute to changes in practice and improvements in teaching.

The theme of Public Health and Life Skills in schools can have varied meanings and be understood in many ways. It can be related to what students should learn about the topic within a specific school subject and to perspectives on their own health and managing their own lives, or it can include a more general societal perspective. This article examines how teachers work with the theme of life skills in schools and how vocational pedagogical development work (YPU) has contributed to changes in practice. The empirical basis is qualitative methods to provide a better and deeper understanding of teachers' work with this theme in education (Johannessen et al., 2016). By analyzing exam responses from the YPU study, this study seeks insight into how the interdisciplinary theme of Public Health and Life Skills is practiced in vocational training. Teachers have worked independently on their projects, and the workplace has served as a meeting place for sharing experiences and developing competence. We researchers have facilitated dialogue-based action research processes and guided teachers through the YPU work. (Kristiansen et al., 2024).

Both studies are sub-projects in the action research project "Teacher Education Schools in Vocational Teacher Education" (LUSY Project) – OsloMet. The theoretical foundation in LUSY has a pragmatic and critical perspective on learning, education, and research, which is reflected in this article, supplemented with perspectives related to life skills.

Life skills as a curricular focus are also emphasized as a fundamental competence by WHO (1994), including cross-disciplinary skills like self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, creative thinking, decision-making, problem-solving, interpersonal relationships, effective communication, coping with stress, and managing emotions (Danielsen, 2021, p. 158-159). Teachers and researchers are keen to develop more practical knowledge in this area, aiming to help students manage future work life (Kristiansen et. al., 2024). The development will involve various trials of pedagogical and vocational didactic methods in vocational training, aimed at facilitating life skills within holistic vocational tasks. Society in general needs future employees who possess the ability to manage their personal lives and workdays as an essential part of their overall vocational competence.

Research question: How can the theme of life skills be integrated into vocational education to develop socially relevant, holistic vocational competence?

1.1 Background

The Norwegian educational reform that began in 2020 highlights the importance of integrating life skills into the curriculum. Life skills go beyond academic knowledge, encompassing abilities essential for personal development and active participation in society. The Ministry of Education (2017) outlines that these skills are crucial for students to navigate the complexities of modern life, including personal well-being, social relationships, and professional responsibilities.

The reform identifies three main cross-disciplinary themes: 1.) Health and Life Skills, 2.) Democracy and Citizenship, and 3.) Sustainable Development. These themes are designed to be embedded across various subjects, reflecting the interconnected nature of contemporary challenges. Health and Life Skills are crucial for fostering resilience, adaptability, and emotional intelligence among students. Prebesen & Hegstad (2017) refer to the importance of students in school developing knowledge that helps them handle both successes and challenges in everyday life in order to master a future professional life.

1.2 Previous research and current gaps

Despite the acknowledged importance of life skills, there is limited research on how these can be effectively integrated into vocational education. Vocational education focuses on preparing students for specific trades and professions, traditionally emphasizing technical skills over broader competencies. However, the dynamic nature of today's labor market requires a more holistic approach to education, where life skills are given equal importance. Previous research indicates that Vocational education in schools must be relevant to students' future career choices so that they see the purpose and meaning in what they are learning. A holistic approach to developing vocational competence is essential for students to develop social skills as a key competence in all professions and trades (Sylte, 2022). The action research project "Holistic Vocational Competence with Life Skills on the Agenda" aims to address this gap. Preliminary findings from the YPU reports through the LUSY project indicate a strong need for incorporating life skills into vocational training to better prepare students for the work life (Kristiansen et. al. 2024).

1.3 Relevance to vocational education

Vocational education in Norway is undergoing significant transformation to align with the changing demands of the labor market. Employers increasingly seek employees who are not only technically proficient but also possess strong life skills, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving abilities. These competencies are essential for adapting to the evolving nature of work and contributing effectively to organizational goals. Integrating life skills into vocational education can enhance students' readiness for work life, providing them with a competitive edge. Moreover, it can contribute to their overall personal development, enabling them to lead fulfilling lives both professionally and personally. Relevant vocational education involves developing the skills to manage one's own life and various life transitions in general, not just technical and vocational skills. An inclusive classroom and school environment is important for students to experience security, develop their identity, and build self-confidence (Haaland & Nilsen, 2020, p. 73). In this context, the school setting will serve as a meeting point for an education that upholds principles of learning, development, and personal formation (Ministry of Education, 2017).

2 Theoretical framework

Action research is a participatory and iterative methodology that seeks to address practical problems through collaborative inquiry and reflection. Kemmis (2009) describes action

research as a practice-based approach that emphasizes the active involvement of practitioners in the research process. This methodology is particularly suited for educational settings, where the goal is to improve teaching and learning practices through systematic inquiry.

Stenhouse (1975) introduced the concept of "Teacher Research," emphasizing teachers as active participants in research to improve their own practices. This approach challenges the traditional view of teachers as passive recipients of pedagogical theory, instead empowering them as researchers in their classrooms. Elliott (1991) further develops this concept by focusing on action research as a method for teacher development, advocating for systematic inquiry and reflection to understand and enhance teaching practices.

As a methodological approach, action research focuses on combining action and reflection in a cyclical process. According to Kemmis (2009), action research is a practice-based approach that actively involves participants in the research process. This involves a dynamic interaction between planning, action, observation, and reflection. A key principle in action research is democratic participation. This principle emphasizes the importance of including all relevant actors in the research process to ensure that different perspectives and experiences are heard and valued. Hiim (2020) stresses that it can be challenging to navigate the various directions within action research, but it is crucial to recognize the significance of democratic participation to achieve meaningful and sustainable changes.

Dialogue and reflection are fundamental components of all action research. Kemmis (2009) points out that dialogue is a powerful tool for promoting collaboration, reflection, and mutual understanding among participants. Through dialogue, researchers and participants can jointly construct knowledge, challenge assumptions, and develop innovative solutions to complex issues. Participant observation is a method that allows researchers to gain deep insights into the context being studied. This involves researchers being present in the classroom to observe teaching practices, interactions between teachers and students, and classroom dynamics. According to Hiim (2020), participant observation captures both the explicit and implicit, which is crucial for understanding the complex social processes influencing learning and interaction. Interviews are another central method in action research, providing depth in understanding participants' perspectives. By conducting interviews with both teachers and students, researchers can gain insight into their experiences, opinions, and reflections on the studied topics. This promotes open dialogue and allows for reflection and discussion around observations made during participant observation.

Dialogue conferences are a methodological approach that promotes equal communication and interaction among participants. Gustavsen (1992 in Hiim, 2020) describes dialogue conferences as meeting places where all participants can speak, and emphasis is placed on listening to each other. This helps develop a common understanding of challenges and opportunities and plan and implement measures together.

A. L. Sylte's article (2020) "Predicting the Future Competence Needs in Working Life: Didactical Implications for VET" delves into the challenges facing professional and vocational education, particularly the lack of alignment between educational content and the ever-changing demands of the labor market. The study highlights two primary challenges: the perceived inadequacy in the relevance and coherence between the curriculum and the skills required in the modern labor market. The research emphasizes the importance of anticipating future competence needs in the labor market to ensure that vocational education programs adequately prepare students for work life. By predicting and adapting educational content to the continuously evolving demands of working life, vocational schools can enhance the relevance of their training. This proactive approach aims to bridge the gap between classroom instruction and real-world application, equipping students with the skills and knowledge necessary for their future careers. Furthermore, Sylte's work underscores the didactical implications of addressing these challenges in vocational education. By recognizing the need for a more responsive and forward-

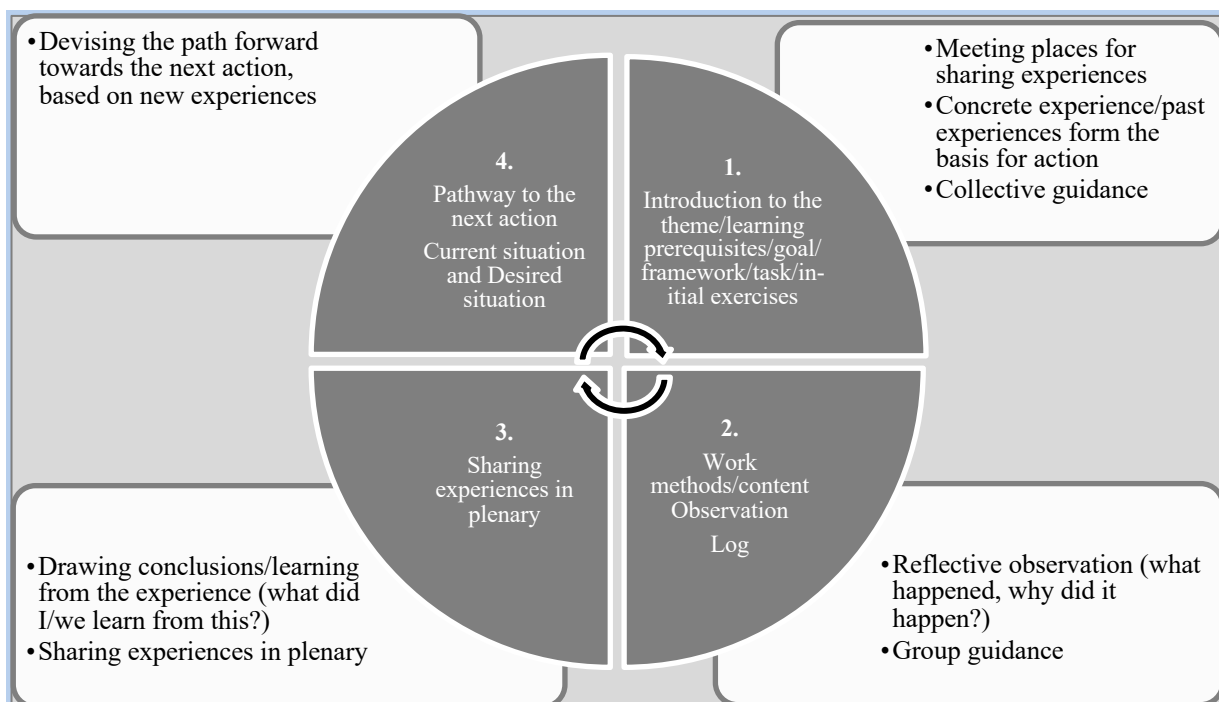
looking approach to curriculum development, educators can better adapt teaching methods and content to meet the dynamic demands of the modern workplace. This shift towards a more predictive and adaptable educational model can lead to improved student outcomes, increased employability, and greater overall satisfaction with vocational training (Sylte, 2020).

McNiff (2014) and Bourdieu (2023) contribute to the understanding of reflexive practice by emphasizing the importance of systematic reflection in teachers' work. McNiff argues that through reflection on and evaluation of their own actions, teachers can develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of teaching. This process allows teachers to critically assess their methodologies, identify areas for improvement, and adapt their strategies to better meet the needs of their students. By engaging in continuous reflection, teachers can become more effective and responsive educators. Bourdieu points out that teachers' actions and decisions are also shaped by social and cultural contexts, which must be considered in reflexive practice. He highlights that the educational environment is influenced by various socio-cultural factors, including power dynamics, institutional structures, and cultural capital. Teachers' practices are not isolated but are interwoven with the broader social fabric, and understanding this interconnectedness is crucial for meaningful reflexive practice. By acknowledging these influences, teachers can gain insight into how their own backgrounds and biases impact their teaching and how they can navigate and address these complexities to create more equitable learning experiences.

To ensure validity and reliability in research, it is important to use systematic methods for data collection and analysis. Kolb's learning cycle (1984) and the didactic relational model (Hiim & Hippe, 2001; Sylte, 2016) are tools that can help researchers structure experience sharing and evaluations, see Figure 1. Through systematic reflection and documentation, we can achieve a high degree of validity in research, which is crucial for drawing reliable conclusions.

Figure 1

Own visual model inspired by Kolb's (1984) learning cycle and the didactic relational model (Hiim & Hippe, 2001). The inner core of the circle illustrates how the teachers worked in their teaching. The outer core of the circle illustrates how we, as university researchers, worked in the four cycles.



By combining democratic participation, dialogue, participatory observation, and interviews, as well as the use of dialogue conferences and reflexive practice, we can develop a deeper understanding of the complex processes that influence learning and teaching. By applying these theoretical frameworks in our action research project, we can contribute to improving teaching practices and the learning environment in schools, as well as better preparing students for future challenges in work life.

Aakernes et al. (2023) describe how self-studies through writing and analyzing logs can contribute to professional development. This allows teachers to reflect on their practice, identify areas for improvement, and develop new insights and understanding. By promoting collaborative self-study, we can improve practice while contributing to the broader goals of the action research project.

2.1 Development of holistic vocational competence with focus on life skills

Action research can be a method for implementing curricula and developing teachers' instruction, but it requires careful planning, collaboration, and engagement from all involved parties. Schools can use action research to develop their teaching practices and implement national curricula. By involving teachers and students in the process, schools can create a more relevant and engaging curriculum that incorporates life skills into vocational education. Participation in this process can enhance student involvement and engagement in vocational training. "Life skills are about understanding and being able to influence factors that are important for mastering one's own life" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 13).

The core of the project will focus on working theory and practice alternately and continuously to ensure the development of holistic vocational competence. Developing holistic vocational competence must be seen in relation to the whole person and the vocational competence itself. Holistic learning provides an understanding of how we learn and develop in interaction with our surroundings and other people (Gulbrandsen & Forslin, 1997). The school as a learning environment can facilitate life skills at the individual level, but also from a societal and social perspective (Meld. St. 28 (2015-2016, p. 39). Life skills, as a cross-disciplinary competence, will be highlighted as a competence developed and applied across different subjects (Danielsen, 2021, p. 155). The project's aim is to advance the teaching profession through didactic experiments that facilitate life skills within holistic vocational tasks. Education where students develop their self-image and secure their own identity, can help them be better prepared for future professional life and tasks. Life skills involve understanding how individuals can influence factors that affect their ability to manage their own lives. The focus should be on helping students handle successes and challenges, as well as personal and practical issues in the best possible way. Holistic vocational competence involves developing skills in a specific vocational field and building the ability to manage one's life and navigate various transitions in daily life.

3 Expected outcomes

The goal of the action research will be to provide examples from teachers' experiences on how life skills can be integrated into comprehensive, relevant tasks in vocational education. Life skills can be facilitated in upper secondary school and highlight some tools/trials that can provide relevant competencies for students' future careers. Trials will demonstrate a practice that can help to show how upper secondary school can systematically support students in developing the competence to handle a future working life. The expected results of this action research project include both immediate and long-term outcomes. These outcomes will be evaluated through continuous data collection and analysis, with adjustments made based on findings throughout the project.

The integration of life skills into vocational education necessitates a significant enhancement in teaching practices. Teachers are required to focus on developing and refining their

methods to effectively merge life skills with vocational training. This involves creating comprehensive lesson plans and engaging activities that seamlessly incorporate life skills, ensuring alignment with the vocational training objectives. By adopting this approach, teachers aim to provide a more holistic education, preparing students not only for professional success but also for personal growth. This strategy involves a meticulous planning process where teachers design lessons that integrate life skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving into vocational subjects. For instance, a lesson on automotive repair might include teamwork exercises or customer service simulations, thereby embedding essential life skills into the technical curriculum. This approach ensures that students receive a well-rounded education, equipping them with the necessary tools to succeed in various aspects of their lives.

3.1 Increased student engagement

A notable immediate outcome of integrating life skills into vocational education is the anticipated increase in student engagement. When students participate in activities that are directly relevant to their personal development and future careers, they are more likely to be invested in their learning. By making the curriculum more meaningful and applicable to real-world situations, students find the educational experience more relevant and motivating. This increased engagement is expected to transform the classroom atmosphere into a more dynamic and interactive environment. Students who see the direct benefits of their education in their daily lives are more likely to participate actively, retain information better, and apply their knowledge in practical settings. For example, incorporating financial literacy into a business course not only teaches students about managing finances but also engages them by showing the direct application of these skills in their future careers.

3.2 Improved student competencies

The integration of life skills into vocational education aims to enhance student competencies in several key areas, including self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving. These competencies are crucial for personal and professional success in today's complex world. To measure the effectiveness of this integration, a combination of pre- and post-implementation surveys will be utilized, providing quantitative data on the improvement of these skills. Additionally, qualitative feedback from both students and teachers will offer valuable insights into the practical benefits and challenges of the program. This comprehensive evaluation ensures that the integration of life skills meets educational standards while supporting the students' overall growth. For instance, students might participate in role-playing exercises to develop empathy or engage in group projects to enhance their teamwork and problem-solving abilities.

3.3 Holistic student development

In the long term, the integration of life skills into vocational education is expected to foster holistic student development. This development encompasses a broad set of competencies that prepare students for both professional and personal success. By combining technical skills with essential life skills, students will be better equipped to navigate the complexities of modern life and work. The holistic approach ensures that students are not only proficient in their chosen vocations but also possess the necessary life skills to thrive in various situations. For example, a student trained in culinary arts will not only master cooking techniques but also develop skills in time management, customer service, and teamwork, making them well-rounded professionals.

3.3 Sustainable teaching practices

Another significant long-term outcome is the establishment of sustainable teaching practices. The project aims to create a culture of continuous improvement among teachers, encouraging them to adapt and refine their methods even after the initial research period. By involving teachers in the research process, the project fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to the integration of life skills. This sustainable approach ensures that the benefits of the project extend beyond its duration. Teachers will be equipped with the tools and knowledge to continuously improve their practices, leading to lasting changes in vocational education. For instance, teachers might regularly attend professional development workshops focused on integrating new life skills into their curricula.

3.4 Model for other schools

The methodologies and findings developed through this project can serve as a model for other vocational schools. By documenting the process and outcomes, the project provides valuable insights and practical strategies that can be implemented in other educational settings. This dissemination of knowledge can help other schools replicate the success of the project, leading to broader improvements in vocational education. For example, the project might produce detailed guides and case studies showcasing successful integration strategies, which can be shared with other schools. These resources can help educators understand the benefits and implementation steps of integrating life skills into vocational education.

3.5 Informed educational policy

Finally, the results of this research have the potential to inform educational policy at both local and national levels. By demonstrating the benefits of integrating life skills into vocational education, the project can advocate for policy changes that support the holistic development of students. Policymakers can use the project's findings to make informed decisions about curriculum design and educational priorities. For instance, evidence from the project could support the inclusion of mandatory life skills training in vocational programs, ensuring that all students receive a comprehensive education. By influencing policy, the project can contribute to systemic changes that benefit a larger number of students across various educational contexts.

4 Conclusion

Integrating life skills into vocational education aims to better prepare students for today's complex job market. This project, "Holistic Vocational Competence with Life Skills on the Agenda," looks to show how adding life skills to vocational training can help students develop both personally and professionally. Though the project is still in its early stages, we expect positive results. We believe that teaching life skills will increase student engagement and help them develop important abilities like self-awareness, empathy, critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving. These skills are essential for both work and personal life. The project also aims to fill a gap in vocational education by showing how life skills can be integrated into everyday tasks. We hope this approach will improve teaching methods and create a more engaging learning environment. Additionally, we aim to encourage a culture of ongoing improvement among teachers.

In summary, this project emphasizes the importance of combining life skills with technical skills in vocational education. This holistic approach will better equip students for the challenges of the modern workforce and help them lead successful and fulfilling lives. The outcomes of this research could guide educational policy and serve as a model for other vocational schools, leading to wider improvements in vocational education.

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