

# **Apprentices' Perceptions of Teachers' and In-Company Trainers' Skills at the Core of Training Quality**

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**Summary:** Teachers' and in-company trainers' skills constitute an important component of quality in initial vocational education and training. This study aimed at investigating how these skills are perceived by 320 apprentices from the technical and the retail fields in Switzerland. Written answers to six open-ended questions were analyzed with both an inductive and a deductive procedure. Results show that apprentices expect their teachers and trainers to master multiple skills. Specifically, pedagogical skills hold a central role, whereas trade-specific and social skills appear as secondary. Furthermore, teachers are highly expected to have updated trade-specific skills and, in parallel, in-company trainers are expected to hold appropriate pedagogical skills. The significance of the role and pedagogical preparation of teachers and trainers is discussed.

**Keywords:** initial vocational education and training, quality, teachers' and trainers' skills

## **Introduction**

Initial vocational education and training (IVET) quality is an important topic for both its field stakeholders (i.e., apprentices, vocational school teachers and in-company trainers) and policy-makers (Gonon, 2017). For the IVET actors, quality notably relates to apprentices' willingness to exert effort but also to prematurely terminate their contract (Negrini, Forsblom, Gurtner, & Schumann, 2016). For political stakeholders, training quality provides leverage to improving access to the labor market, resulting in a lower unemployment rate among young people.

IVET quality is a complex subject encompassing various aspects. The definition may vary depending on which actor provides his point of view: more or less importance is given to certain aspects of quality. For instance, apprentices might consider the number and significance of learning opportunities as reflecting the quality of training, whereas in-company trainers might stress the importance of an adequate fit between the occupation and the apprentices' motivation. Furthermore, the multiple learning locations and their purposes should be considered to qualify IVET quality (Griffin, 2017).

According to prior research, some of the most prevalent aspects of IVET quality to consider are the skills of teachers and in-company trainers (Negrini et al., 2016). Notably, the apprentices' satisfaction with their training depends partly on how they perceive their teachers' and trainers' skills. While several types of these skills (trade-specific<sup>1</sup>, pedagogical, and social skills) have been described (Mamaqi, Miguel, & Olave, 2011), less is known about which skills apprentices expect and perceive from

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<sup>1</sup> Trade-specific skills are knowledge and experience related to the trade.

their teachers and trainers, respectively. Accordingly, this contribution examines how teachers' and trainers' skills matter for the quality of training, according to Swiss IVET apprentices. Data from an exploratory pilot study was used. The following two research questions were asked. According to apprentices' perceptions:

1. How important are teachers' and in-company trainers' perceived skills to the quality of training?
2. What type of perceived skills are the most relevant for training quality in teachers and in-company trainers, respectively?

## Methods and research design

Three hundred and twenty apprentices in two occupational fields participated in the study: technical (n=188; 10.5% women) and retail (n=132; 64.1% women). They were enrolled in a dual IVET program in Switzerland, including one day per week at a vocational school and the other days at a training company. The choice of these professional fields was partly due to the vocational schools' availability but also to the target audience in further studies. In addition, the two professional domains differ in the types of tasks and in terms of prior knowledge they demand.

Apprentices were asked to answer six open-ended questions assessing their perceptions of the quality of education and training at the IVET school and the training company. Specifically, for each of the two learning locations, apprentices wrote down a) what they like in their IVET program ("What do you like in your education at school/the training company?"); b) the positive aspects of their IVET program ("What are the positive aspects of your education at school/the training company?"), and c) the aspects to be improved ("What could be improved in your education at school/the training company?"). The answers were fully transcribed and coded in Nvivo, following both inductive and deductive approaches. 17 thematic codes referring to school (including 1872 meaning units) and 18 to the training company (including 1841 meaning units) were created<sup>2</sup>. Among all the codes, and based on apprentices' statements, six related to the teachers' and three to the in-company trainers' perceived skills: 1) pedagogical skills (subdivided into general pedagogical skills, autonomy support, and structure for the teachers' codes but merged into a single code for analyses); 2) trade-specific skills; 3) social skills (cf. Table 1). The skills analyzed in this paper are based on apprentices' perceptions of teachers' and trainers' behaviors: they are therefore referred to as "perceived skills."

For the analyses, no striking difference was found between the positive aspects of IVET quality and those needing improvement: answers from questions a) and b) were thus merged with those from question c).

## Results and Conclusions

Globally, teachers' and trainers' perceived skills were highly mentioned by apprentices as reflecting the quality of their training: 26% (n=439) of the meaning units for IVET school were related to teachers' skills, and 16% (n=291) of the meaning units for in-company training were related to trainers' skills.

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<sup>2</sup> Based on 5% of the statements, the intercoder agreement was satisfying (school: Krippendorff's  $\kappa=.782$ ; training company:  $\kappa=.736$ ).

Table 1 shows the frequencies and definitions of the codes related to teachers' and trainers' perceived skills. Most statements referred more to the teachers' and trainers' perceived pedagogical skills (e.g., "some teachers teach well," "my trainer is always there if I need help"), and less to perceived trade-specific (e.g., "teachers who have practical experience, not just educational" "the trainer succeeds in transmitting the good practices for each 'exercise' because he knows the job") and social skills ("teachers are nice," "the trainer is kind and tolerant"). No striking difference was observed between the two fields considered.

**Table 1: Frequencies and definition of the codes related to teachers and trainers' perceived skills.**

Perceived skills	School		Training company		Definition
	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	
Pedagogical	64	281	79	230	Monitoring, support, availability, help towards apprentices.
General pedagogical	19	83	-	-	Teacher pedagogical skills: course planning, teaching method's choices, classroom management.
Structure	25	109	-	-	The amount and quality of information provided about how apprentices are expected to effectively achieve.
Autonomy support	20	89	-	-	To take into account the perspective, feelings and behaviors of apprentices in order to support the development of their motivation.
Trade-specific	20	87	7	21	Professional skills, knowledge of the trade, professional experience.
Social	16	71	14	40	The ability to establish contact and trust with apprentices, to create a good atmosphere, to be friendly. For teachers: intrinsic motivation and enthusiasm for teaching.
Total codes	-	439	-	291	

Perceived pedagogical skills were the most prominently indicated for both teachers and trainers. This imbalance was outstanding for trainers: apprentices seemed to judge the quality of their in-company training based on their trainers' perceived pedagogical skills (e.g., "the trainer provides good explanations from the beginning and shows what he wants and expects from me"); trainers' perceived trade-specific and social skills were much less mentioned. Concerning the teachers' perceived pedagogical skills, apprentices stressed the importance of teachers' availability in terms of the time dedicated to as well as the quality of explanations ("teachers who take the time to explain") but also being attentive and monitoring and supporting the apprentices ("teachers are always listening to us").

Concerning the perceived trade-specific skills, apprentices indicated the importance for teachers to have recent or concurrent professional experience in the trade and reported a lack of such skills in some teachers ("some teachers should be replaced because they haven't seen the field in 20 years"). In contrast, in-company trainers were not required to display such skills, probably because they are seen as professionals in the apprentices' occupation by definition. Thus, teachers were expected to possess this additional "asset" of trade-specific skills to appear credible in the apprentices' eyes.

Apprentices were also more critical of teachers' perceived social skills than trainers'. Teachers were expected to be more enthusiastic and motivated to provide quality teaching ("most teachers are motivated and involved in the way they teach"), whereas, for trainers, the absence of such criticism revealed that apprentices do not rely on these perceived skills to judge the quality of their training. Hence, apprentices need support to engage in their apprenticeship in school but not necessarily in the training company. It appears that, for apprentices, teachers must be intrinsically

motivated by their profession, while this aspect was not emphasized for in-company trainers.

Regarding the first research question, it seems that teachers' and trainers' skills are crucial elements to apprentices' perceptions of training quality. In fact, they spontaneously reported the importance of well trained teachers and trainers, as well as the lack of skills as a problematic aspect in their education and training. Regarding research question two, according to apprentices, both teachers and in-company trainers require good pedagogical skills above all; yet, teachers are also expected to have trade-specific skills and should be motivated by their teaching profession, whereas trainers do not seem to display these skills.

Lastly, despite the different professional fields (and therefore the distinct training demands) of the apprentices interviewed, the results indicate a certain consensus in the perception of the teachers' and trainers' skills. The analyses show no striking differences between the two occupational fields.

In terms of significance, the results illustrate how teachers' and trainers' skills are part of what apprentices perceive and define as training quality. According to apprentices, central elements in defining the quality of their IVET are teachers' and in-company trainers' skills, especially pedagogical skills. The apprentices were critical of their teachers and trainers, expecting from them multiple and high-level skills. These results show that apprentices have strong expectations of teachers and trainers, bringing to light a certain "lack of legitimacy" of vocational schools (Gurtner, Gulfi, Genoud, de Rocha Trindade, & Schumacher, 2012). Also, trade-specific and social skills were perceived as secondary. It is nevertheless necessary to consider some limitations, in particular the fact that the apprentices' answers were, in most cases, very short and might refer not only to teachers of vocational knowledge but also to teachers of general knowledge. However, the results show that there is some commonality between apprentices from different professional fields.

Finally, the fact that the apprentices mentioned the necessity for teachers to have recent meaningful trade-specific experiences underlines the need to recruit second career teachers with significant vocational experience in addition to the importance for school heads to choose candidates with a vocational pathway, rather than candidates with an academic pathway. While further professionalization of IVET teachers and trainers might contribute to improve IVET quality by primarily targeting their pedagogical knowledge, this increase in formal education might be in opposition to the focus on vocational experience.

## Literature

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