

The Devaluation of Practical Training

An Examination of the Role of In-Field Training in Swedish Police Education

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Abstract

This article examines the historical development of in-field training within Swedish police education from its centralization in 1967 to the present. By tracing key reforms, we analyze how the length, structure, and purpose of in-field training have shifted over time. Compared to other Scandinavian countries, Sweden has the shortest period of in-field training, raising concerns about its role in police education. Despite efforts to enhance supervision and establish clearer learning objectives, in-field training remains marginalized, with no clear consensus on its function. Drawing on the research field of practical knowledge, we investigate in-field training as a structured learning process essential for professional development. We argue that the historical uncertainty surrounding in-field training reflects a broader lack of recognition of in-field training as an integral part of police education, reinforcing a persistent divide between theoretical instruction and practical experience.

Keywords

police education, in-field training, probationer, practical knowledge, police reforms

1. Introduction

Police education, like any vocational or professional training, relies both on theoretical knowledge found in books and manuals, and on practical knowledge found in training and in the field. The process of the academization of police education has put more emphasis on the need for better theoretical knowledge. This has in turn led to a well-known tension between “practitioners” and “academics” regarding the proper relationship between practical training and theoretical studies in police education (Cordner & Shain, 2011; Fekjær & Hove, 2014; Fekjær et al., 2014; Fekjær & Petersson, 2020; Hagen et al., 2023; Hjertström Lappalainen, (2021); Kohlström, 2022, 2023; Winnæss, 2017, 2023a, 2023b). Sometimes this is framed as a clash of values, with university education being seen

as a way to infuse police culture with more liberal values to inoculate against the notorious “cop-culture” (Madestam, 2020).

A lesser-studied issue is how academization has affected the role of in-field training as a valuable form of education in its own right. In-field training has always been a part of police education, but it has not been thoroughly investigated as a legitimate form of education. Following the tradition of studies in practical knowledge, we argue that in-field training is not only a time to test skills acquired elsewhere or a time to “unlearn what they taught you in school,” but a form of learning in its own right. It is only through practice in the field that one progresses from novice to competent practitioner.

A comparison of how in-field training has been structured during the educational reforms following the nationalization of police training reveals considerable variation in its duration. As illustrated in the figure below both the length of field training and its proportion relative to the overall program changed significantly during each of the reforms throughout the twentieth century, but remained unaffected in the two most recent reforms (Figure 1).

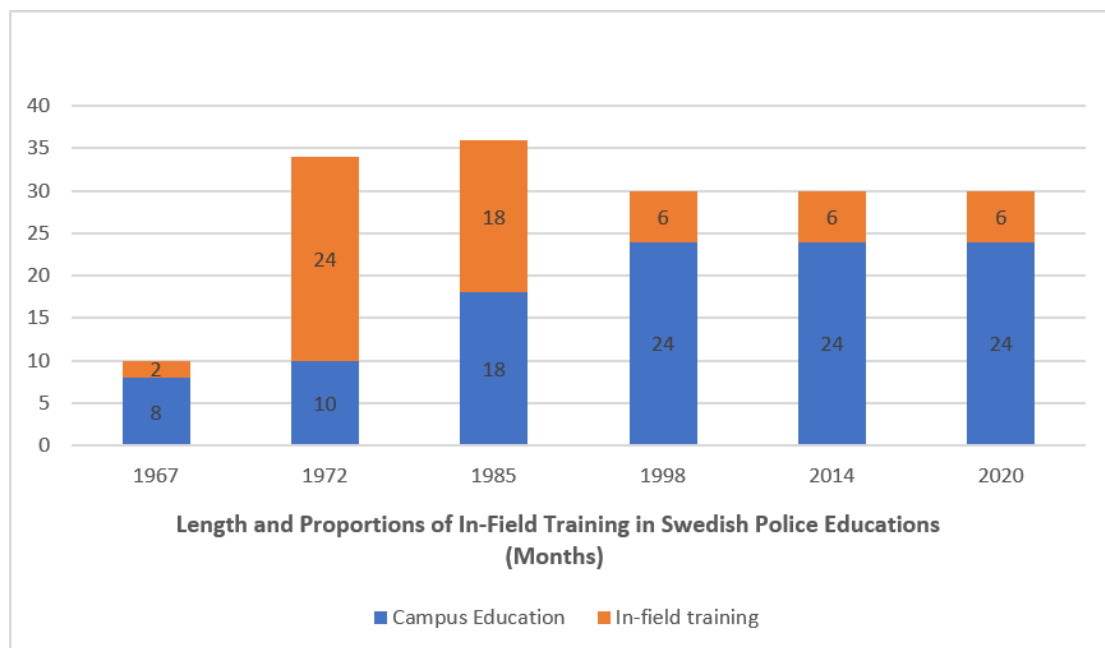


Figure 1. Length and Proportions of In-Field Training in Swedish Police Education

In this study we trace the development of the Swedish police education from 1967, when police education was centralized and unified, to today. We investigate how police education reformers have dealt with the issue of the proper length, placement and content of the period of in-field training. We start from the observation that the period of in-field training has varied a lot in all three dimensions, and its duration has steadily been reduced. Today, Swedish police have a significantly lower proportion of in-field training than the other Scandinavian countries. In Norway, Denmark and Finland, in-field training lasts approximately one year (Bergman & Lauritz, 2020; Politi, 2025).

One effect of the shift toward academization within the context of Swedish police education has been the transfer of school-based training to the university system, while in-field training has remained under the responsibility of the national Police Authority. This has led to an organizational divide between school-based education and in-field training. Over the decades,

reforms aimed at integrating these two components have been repeatedly followed by periods of separation, creating a cyclical pattern. This suggests unresolved issues and a lack of attention from reformers regarding the role of in-field training.

In Sweden there are several governing documents regulating what probationers are entitled to during in-field training and what they are supposed to achieve (e.g., PM, 2016, 2018a, 2018b). These governing documents demonstrate an awareness that in-field training is an education, as well as awareness of theoretical insights into what a meaningful internship must contain in order to provide probationers the opportunity to develop professional skills. (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Schön, 1987). In the Police Authority's annual follow-up of the training, it also appears that it is functioning properly; the majority of probationers candidates pass the training without extension, and only a few fail.

Alongside these evaluations, however, there has been consistent criticism since the in-field training was shortened in 1998. The Police Authority's internal investigations and Swedish government reports (SOU) have repeatedly stated that it is too short to be meaningful. In several regions the police organization has instituted a so-called sixth semester of in-field training (SOU, 2008, p. 57; Karlsen, 2006). This shows an internal rejection of the adequacy of the training, and a lack of trust in the system. An additional factor is that Probationer-supervisors and Field training officers (FTOs) claim that they do not have the time and resources to offer probationers the support and teaching that the governing documents prescribe (Bergman & Karp, 2021). What is more serious is that the probationers themselves experience feelings of inadequacy and stress (Bergman & Karp, 2021; Emsing et al., 2022). Swedish in-field training appears to be both insufficient and too short.

In this article, we map the changes in in-field training within Swedish police education and explore the motives that may have driven them. Our research questions are: Why has the in-field training period changed? What importance is attributed to in-field training from an educational perspective in the governing documents? And how is this educational importance reflected in the implementation?

The design and the name of the in-field training period has varied over the years. What we refer to as *in-field training* is the period during which a police student, under the supervision and guidance of a more experienced police officer, engages in actual police work in the field. We also assign a uniform designation for the actual interns. In the article we have chosen the term *probationers*, which is established in the international research field.

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Theoretical considerations

An approach to formulating practical knowledge and highlighting the necessity of practical education is made by Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus, who, in their seminal work, claim that professional skills cannot be developed without a progressively structured learning period involving practical experience and exercises (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). According to Dreyfus and Dreyfus, learning practical abilities, unlike the cumulative learning of, e.g., legal or psychological theories, involves recognizing and navigating complex situations. Confined practical exercises alone turn out to be insufficient for professions like medicine, aviation, or policing. A crucial part of the education in these demanding fields consists of real-life practice, where students' abilities are tested in authentic situations. The Dreyfuses emphasize that this phase is not merely supplementary but central to vocational training. They describe learning as a progression from analytical, deliberate action to intuitive, skilled performance—where new situations are holistically

paired with appropriate responses, i.e., as a movement from abstract to concrete knowledge (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986, p. 34).

During in-field training, students are expected to develop practical skills and knowledge. However, these are often not explicitly defined but understood as experiences or abilities. Unlike subjects such as mathematics, where knowledge is clearly categorized and graded, practical knowledge is rarely assessed in such structured ways (Hjertström Lappalainen, 2014; Polanyi, 1967). In fields like aviation or teaching, competence is often measured by hours of experience, which means practical knowledge tends to remain implicit or even unconscious—risking its devaluation. A key aim in the field of Studies of Practical Knowledge is therefore to conceptualize and raise awareness of practical knowledge, as conceptualization enhances its perceived value.

Historically, in-field training as a part of education has been neglected in educational theory. In Swedish government reports (SOU) discussing reforms in police education—as well as in research (Bergman & Lauritz, 2020; Bäck, 2020; Furuhausen, 2015; Stensöta, 2004) there are detailed explanations of why certain subjects have been added or removed, including factors such as representation, work management, and public interaction. Arguments and discussions regarding the role of in-field training are considerably sparser. The practical training has not been given the same pedagogical care as the teaching that takes place in more traditional environments such as classrooms or laboratories. That practical knowledge has nevertheless been considered necessary is evident in other ways. Medieval cobblers, blacksmiths, and seamstresses trained their employees long before today's education system was established. The idea was that the novice thus is guided into the profession by a more experienced, competent, or skilled person. This has been described as an educational model that is still common in some parts of the world and in the West still dominant within, for example, certain artistic professions, the so-called apprentice model. Apprentices learn from a master by starting with simpler tasks and progressively tackling more advanced ones as their understanding grows. When in-field training came to be thematized as an educational model it became highlighted that apprentices are gradually *introduced* and led into the profession. This model assumes that the master, through knowledge and experience, supports the apprentice's professional development (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). However, the apprentice model has been criticized for primarily focusing on preserving existing methods and structures, potentially leading to conservatism and resistance to change (Grelle, 1993).

One thinker who emphasizes the necessity of in-field training, and further elaborates what is required for it to be meaningful and developmental, is Donald Schön. According to Schön, in-field training presents an intermediate space between professional practice and school. In this space, students become acquainted with the professional world, which involves “particular ways of seeing, thinking, and doing.” For a student, this intermediate space involves learning to embody these ways while also learning to recognize competent practice (Schön, 1987, p. 36). Schön describes this as the process of learning to think like a professional (Schön, 1987, p. 34). He emphasizes that it is a period of *training*, and as such should include opportunities to make mistakes. Schön suggests that in-field training could ideally be seen as “a virtual world, relatively free of the pressures, distractions, and risks of the real one, to which, nevertheless, it refers.” He writes, “Picking up a practice on one's own has the advantage of freedom to experiment without the constraints of received views” (Schön, 1987, p. 37). Ideally, this is the case, but in reality, it often falls short: “most offices, factories, firms, and clinics are not set up for the demanding tasks of initiation and education. Pressures for performance tend to be high; time, at a premium; and

mistakes, costly” (Schön, 1987, p. 37). This, as we will see, turns out to be the case also in police education.

A further aspect of the in-field training is its function as a testing period for the novice. It is crucial for supervisors to expose students to exercise and assess whether they qualify for the profession. If in-field training is understood as a *trial*, students are motivated to prove their abilities, and the supervisor’s role as an assessor emerges. In the education system that has developed since the 1980 s in the wake of the Bologna Process, there has been an increasing focus on comparability and transparency in assessment. This has resulted in the design of course syllabi, as well as actual teaching, focusing on the possibility of assessment. (Hjertström Lappalainen, 2020). If this learning period mainly focuses on assessment and trial, this might result in the probationers not wanting to risk making mistakes and, therefore, not daring to take the opportunity to train. In the Swedish context, these questions have been addressed in terms of the importance of *supervision* as a way of securing students’ ability to reflect on their actions and decisions (Bergman, 2017; Lauvås & Handal, 2001).

The importance of the period of in-field training in education can be divided into three categories:

1. A period of introduction to the profession (master–apprentice)
2. A period of training
3. A period of trial and examination

These aspects are not strictly separate, but overlap. In Sweden, the in-field training encompasses all three: probationers act as apprentices under their FTOs while holding police authority; the structured syllabus defines it as a training period (PM, 2018a); and the assessment document formalizes its evaluative function by setting required competencies for passing (PM, 2018b).

By starting from these aspects, it becomes possible to see how governing documents and implementations have considered the role and significance of the internship period and what pedagogical care this part of the education has received.

2.2 Methodological considerations

Our primary focus is to understand whether—and if so, how—the governing documents have considered in-field training as a period of learning. We further investigate how actual implementation reflected the ideas presented in the governing documents. It is important to note that the subject of our investigation should primarily be understood as part of broader changes to the overall police education system (and, at times, the police organization as a whole).

The material was analyzed using a process-tracing methodology. The analysis was conducted manually, based on close reading and the construction of a chronological sequence of events. Key events were identified in official documents, and additional sources were used to build a detailed narrative over time (George & Bennet, 2005, pp. 205–232). The primary sources consisted of government reports related to the latest six major police reforms, with particular attention given to sections discussing aspects of in-field training. References to supplementary documents were systematically followed up. In cases where public debates were referenced in

official reports, such as the discussion on the militarization of police training in the early 1970s, newspaper archives were also examined.

Police education in Sweden is regulated by law and statutory regulations. The professional title *policeman* was first introduced in the Swedish Police Act of 1925, which, along with subsequent statutory general police instruction and specific police regulation, set the educational and employment requirements. The 1984 Police Act replaced these with government ordinances, further tightening control and requirements for uniform education. Our analysis explores the regulatory changes in police education, comparing proposed reforms with their implementation. To contextualize our findings, a brief overview of this process is necessary.

Before the government can propose legislative changes, the issue must be evaluated. For this purpose, the government often appoints a special expert or a committee of inquiry, whose mission is outlined in a directive. The committees that designed the reports in this study consisted of groups of four to six participants, some of whom had worked with the police and/or with police training and the judiciary. Although the committee members are politically appointed, they possess relevant expertise, meaning the reports reflect both political ambition and expert analysis. Since the committees operate independent of the government, these reports cannot be seen as explicit expressions of government opinion.

Once the evaluation is complete, the committee presents its proposal in a public report known as the Swedish government official report (SOU). This report is circulated for feedback from central government agencies, local government authorities, and other bodies that might be affected by the proposals. At this stage, the process may change or even stop based on feedback.

After receiving feedback from consultation bodies, the government drafts the legislative proposal, known as the government bill (Proposition). If Parliament votes in favor of the proposal, the bill becomes law (SFS). Government Official Reports sometimes initiate reforms through targeted directives to specific authorities. In some cases, the government enacts regulations without parliamentary approval by issuing an ordinance. An ordinance is a statutory regulation (SFS) enacted by the government in accordance with existing laws.

Additional material used in this study include investigations and reports initiated by individual authorities such as the Ministry of Justice (Justitiedepartementet), Interior Ministry (Inrikesdepartementet) and the Police Authority (PM). Some reports also come from the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ), previously known as UHÄ (1977–92). Prior to centralization, the overarching national Police Authority was the National Police Board (RPS), but today, the Police Authority is the key body.

Another set of material includes regulations and general instructions issued by the Police Authority, referred to as FAP. These are rules governing police work, assigned either an RPSFS number (for the National Police Board) or PMFS number (for the Police Authority), along with a FAP number.

Swedish police education has never been regulated by the Higher Education Act. The various curricula examined in this study were developed by the Police Authority. These curricula are regulated by the Police Training Ordinances: 1985:751,–1999:740,–2014:1105. As police education becomes more aligned with academic standards, the curricula are increasingly being designed to match those regulated under the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100).

Changes in Swedish police training are closely tied to developments in the national police organization. Modern policing emerged in the 1850 s with the establishment of the Stockholm police. At the time, law enforcement was a municipal responsibility under state

supervision, with significant differences between rural and urban police forces. The first step toward modernization came in 1948 when traditional duties, such as tax collection, were removed from police responsibilities. In 1953, municipalities were consolidated into larger administrative units (Berndt, 2023).

The year 1965 marks the beginning of a modernized and unified police force in Sweden, embodying the principles of professionalism and political neutrality. The previously fragmented police forces were consolidated into 119 police authorities, overseen by a central National Police Board led by a National Police Commissioner under the Ministry of Justice (Berndt, 2023).

During the 1980s, the emphasis was on efficiency, innovation, and a reduction of the state's role. In Sweden, this shift began with the *Renewal Bill*, which led to a restructuring into 21 regional police authorities and the introduction of local-level proximity policing initiatives (Proposition, 1989/90). The National Police Board remained the supervisory body.

The most recent major reform took place in 2015, when the 21 regional authorities were merged into a single national police organization, and the National Police Board was abolished. Following this centralization, the police entered a growth period with focus on more police on the streets amid a shift in political focus toward fighting violent organized crime (Ivarsson Westerberg, 2020).

Swedish police education and organization have, during the post-war period, undergone the same phases of reform as seen across much of the Western world. These reforms are often described as comprising three dominant periods of ideas concerning the legitimization of the police. The 1960s marked a phase of depoliticization and a strong belief in professionalization. The 1970s saw a shift toward politicization and increasing demands to bring the police closer to society. In the 1990s, the focus moved to efficiency and crime control (Bowling et al., 2019). To this we may add a fourth wave of reforms in the Nordic countries and Northwestern Europe during the 2000s and 2010s, which emphasized centralization and increased accountability amid growing political salience regarding fear of crime (Fyfe et al., 2013; Granér, 2017; Larsson, 2012; Larsson, 2018; Oddsson et al., 2024; Sørli & Larsson, 2019; Verhage, 2010). Contrary to its intentions, this most recent wave of reform has been criticized for widening the gap between the police and society and for creating an abstract police organization overly focused on managing its public image (Terpstra et al., 2019).

3. Results: Reforms and implementations

3.1 Swedish police education before 1967

At the end of the nineteenth century, police training in Sweden was entirely managed by senior officers. In the early 1900s, police trade unions began advocating for standardized basic police education. However, the government showed little interest, leading to the establishment of a privately initiated police school. This initiative was soon state-funded and made accessible to all police officers and necessary for employment in the larger cities and towns (Furuhagen, 2004, 2009, 2015).

The year 1953 marks the beginning of standardized police education in Sweden. Table 1 That year, police training became a mandatory requirement for employment, and the term *probationer* (*polisaspirant*) was introduced as a standardized, time-limited employment period for police recruits. The probationary period lasted a maximum of two years, during which recruits were required to complete the course. Initially, local police authorities were

responsible for recruitment and provided basic training before sending probationers to police school, where they completed a 21 week Constable Course (Sjöholm, 1959; SOU, 1952). This period served as both a probationary appointment and a training phase. The crucial requirement was that training had to take place, but the timing within the period was left to the discretion of the respective regions.

Table 1. Police Educations in Sweden

	1954–67	1967–72	1972–85	1985–97	1997–2014	2014–20	2020–
Organization of education	Regional Police Schools	Centralized Police School	Centralized Police School	Centralized Police Academy	Police Academy and Commissioned education	Commissioned education	Commissioned education
Relations school and in-field training	Separated	Integrated	Separated	Integrated	Separated	Integrated	Separated
Length of education	1 year (approx.)	1 year	3 years	3 years	2.5 years	2.5 years	2.5 years
Proportion of in-field training	$\frac{1}{4}$	$\frac{1}{6}$	$\frac{2}{3}$	$\frac{1}{2}$	$\frac{1}{5}$	$\frac{1}{5}$	$\frac{1}{5}$

In 1962 an additional eight weeks of introductory basic theoretical and practical training was added to make the training before the Constable Course more uniform. Between the basic training and the Constable Course the probationers had an in-field training at their place of employment for about three months. There were a total of eight regional Police Schools, with the Stockholm-based school as the center (Inrikesdepartementet, 1960; SOU, 1965).

3.2 The integrated model of 1967

The reform of police education in 1967 marked the beginning of modern police education in Sweden (Ambrosiani, 2004). It emerged during a period of fundamental reforms in Sweden's national school system and was characterized by the decade's optimism and ambition to break free from the past. Police education was envisioned as a tool to shape a new, unified national police force—better education and adaptability to a changing world (Inrikesdepartementet, 1960).

The traditional model was that the local police authorities did the recruitment and basic theoretical and practical training. Then the recruits went to one of the state-funded police schools and took the 21 week Constable Course (SOU, 1965, pp. 14–15). The basic education thus varied a lot, and the vision of police reform was to make education more uniform.

In 1967, the regional police schools were closed and the Police School in Stockholm was placed under the newly established National Police Board. It was relocated to a former army regiment in Solna, just north of Stockholm (Proposition, 1964; Riksdagen, 1967; SOU, 1965). The curriculum was structured into three main areas: (1) general knowledge of society and human psychology, (2) specialized theoretical and legal knowledge for criminal investigations, and (3) practical policing skills. A new pedagogical approach was introduced, combining realistic training exercises with classroom instruction in groups of 20 to encourage discussion and teamwork during Constable Course I. The in-field training consisted of an eight-week training period in Stockholm, where students performed

various police tasks under supervision. Afterward, probationers returned to the Police School for Constable Course II to reflect on their experiences. The overarching goal was to centralize basic training in one location to avoid ambiguities between formal education and local practices.

The implementation of the new style of police education faced strong resistance. Many senior teachers felt that the life-like training exercises emphasized the repressive aspects of police work, with insufficient focus on patience and legality. In a debate article the opposition was framed as a revolt against the perceived militarization of the police. A major concern was that the reform directors from the National Police Board, referred to as “the military junta,” all had backgrounds in the armed forces (Odin, 1971). This conflict led to a mass resignation of teachers in 1971. In response, the government appointed a special commission to address the situation, leading to the resignation of the head of the reforms at the National Police Board (Falkenstam, 1983, pp. 115–121; Persson & Sundelin, 1991, p. 181).

Amid this turbulence the structure of in-field training was also criticized for not allowing probationers to handle tasks independently and for incorrect practices in the field. A teacher in psychology at the Police School stressed that although the new Swedish police education was probably the best in the world, it could not provide all the skills a police officer needed. Real policing was still learned on the street (DN, 1972).

The committee behind the reforms regarded education as an important tool for the political ambition to reshape police organizations, and discussions preceding the new design focused entirely on campus-based teaching. In-field training was described in the inquiry as a period where basic theoretical skills would be applied in practice, an objective that was assumed to be attainable within an eight-week period. The purpose of the subsequent Constable Course II was to fine-tune any regional discrepancies that may have arisen during the in-field training. However, the practical period itself was not afforded any pedagogical attention. The committee therefore did not convey a developed understanding of the importance of the educational structure of in-field training in terms of introduction, instruction, or evaluation. The short, Stockholm-based in-field training did not achieve its intended goal (Gullnäs & Tysk, 1972, p. 43; Proposition, 1973, p. 159).

3.3 The separated model of 1972

Following this upheaval, police education was reformed once again. The program at the Police School was extended to 41 weeks, and the eight-week in-field training in Stockholm was replaced by a two-year probationary period known as the *Alternating Service*. This shift marked a return to the tradition of local practical training and can be seen as a response to the 1967 reform’s failure to recognize the importance of introduction into the profession. A two-year probationary period was considered necessary to ensure that recruits developed the independence required for effective police work (Gullnäs & Tysk, 1972, p. 43; Proposition, 1973, p. 159). The program was soon formalized in *FAP 721–2* (RPS, 1972). The first year focused on criminal investigations, while the second emphasized public order and traffic policing. Throughout this period, probationers were mentored by experienced officers and gradually given more independence as they transitioned into full-fledged police officers.

The 1972 reform was implemented hastily, without an extensive government inquiry, creating challenges for police authorities in filling vacant positions. This rapidly introduced solution addressed previous shortcomings by extending the duration of

practical training, allowing probationers to gain experience across different areas of policing and closely aligning with the apprentice model regarding in-field training as an introduction to the profession (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

In connection with the introduction of the Alternating Service, certain specifications were also added regarding how the internship period would be designed and the students assessed. Supervision was supposed to be formalized, with trained supervisors providing evaluations on various aspects of the probationers' work ability, leadership, initiative, cooperation, communication skills, security, judgment, and overall knowledge of the job (SOU, 1979, p. 271).

This abrupt reform, introduced to address the shortcomings of the previous training program, aimed to better prepare police officers for the realities of police work. The main change was an extension of the training period from two to 24 months, alongside new regulations to ensure practical experience across key areas of policing. The requirement for supervisors to provide evaluations suggests that the Alternating Service also served as a trial period. The revised internship, which is referred to as *service* instead of education, regulates that the probationers should be introduced and assessed. However, the actual implementation was instead left to the discretion of individual police stations; it therefore remained unclear how this service gave the probationers supervised practice opportunities.

3.4 The return of the integrated model in 1985

The period after 1972 was characterized by intense discussions and two major investigations that ultimately led to a new curriculum in 1985. During the 1970s, criticism emerged against the centralization of the police. In 1975 a new governmental inquiry was initiated to explore the widening gap between the police and society following the formation of the unified national police force. The inquiry's focus was on rebuilding trust among the police, other authorities, and society (SOU, 1979).

Once again, education was seen as a tool for changing the police organization. The 1979 inquiry claimed that police education was needed to better prepare future police officers for understanding the police organization and their role in society. Police schools should introduce more sociology, psychiatry, and political science to future police to better understand interconnections in society. Education should also be problem-based and research-oriented (SOU, 1979, pp. 33–36). The earlier requirements for military service, which had been a central part of qualification for police education, were de-emphasized.

In line with the decentralization efforts, the Police School was granted more independence within the National Police Board. One key objective was a drive for academization. Police education was to be designed similar to other higher education programs. In 1979, the Police School was rebranded as the Police Academy [*Polishögskolan*], and a research branch led by a professor of Police Studies was proposed to bridge policing and academic research (RPS/UHÄ, 1982, pp. 13–17).

Meanwhile, the Alternating Service system was seen as problematic within the police organization. Although probationers were included in official police statistics as employed staff, they were unable to perform full duties and required supervision, which increased the demand for additional staff. A working group assessed that the period excessively focused on auscultation, and that probationers were doing police work at most only 50% of the time, causing friction among local police authorities (Justitiedepartementet, 1977, pp. 29–31).

In 1979, the Committee suggested that the probationers' time spent in criminal departments should be reduced to a maximum of six months. The focus should be on

developing contact with society through community practices in schools, social services, healthcare institutions, and correctional facilities. The internship was thus shortened to one and a half years. An additional 20 weeks of school education was proposed at the expense of in-field training (SOU, 1979, pp. 271–274).

During this time, awareness of the importance of how education was designed increased, which was evident in the appointment of a new committee in 1982. This was a joint committee consisting of members from both the Swedish Authority for Higher Education and the National Police Board, with the mission to prepare a report on police education reforms. This committee discussed the possibility of placing parts of the education at the universities but concluded that the Police Academy was to be academicized through natural collaboration with universities and the formalization of a collaboration board (RPS/UHÄ, 1982, pp. 5–10).

As outlined in the 1967 vision, field training was integrated into police education (RPS/UHÄ, 1982, pp. 18–34). The 1982 committee recommended enhancing and formalizing the connection between practical training and the Police Academy. The previous label of the in-field training, *Alternating Service*, was replaced with *Practical Education* to more clearly emphasize that it was a period of training rather than service. Its design and content were governed by specific learning objectives aimed at streamlining the students' introduction to active duty. It was also expected that local police authorities would gain greater autonomy in planning their activities. Each district was to appoint a liaison responsible for coordinating practical matters and maintaining communication with the Police Academy. This liaison would ensure that experienced police officers supervising probationers received the necessary education. Furthermore, it was anticipated that the courses in work management that were introduced to the police education curriculum would be a foundation for future tutoring of colleagues (RPS/UHÄ, 1982, pp. 35–37). Ultimately, the goal was to reduce the internship duration by structuring practice opportunities pedagogically.

The results of these two reports did not ultimately lead to the education falling under the Higher Education Ordinance. Instead, the changes to police education were formally regulated by a Police Training Ordinance which complemented the new Police Act (Ambrosiani, 2004, p. 4; SFS, 1985). These changes were then incorporated into the 1985 curriculum for the new police education system (Ambrosiani, 2004, p. 22).

The implementation of the reforms concerning internship proved to be complicated, and a commission was established to address several unresolved issues. These included the need for guidelines on structuring in-field training, organizing community practice, and determining the timing of vacation periods (RPS, 1986). The integration of the in-field training into basic education also introduced new interaction between the Police Academy and local police authorities, particularly in assessing and grading probationers. The responsibility for assessing probationers' aptitude for police work rested solely with the local police authorities, while the Police Academy graded the completion of academic courses (RPS, 1986, p. 11).

During this transformation, the emphasis shifted from service to training, and the in-field training was moved back into the basic police training program. However, the distinction between the Police Academy and period of internship was maintained to clarify the roles of grading academic knowledge and assessing aptitude for police work.

This reform, driven by a desire to transform the police organization, placed greater emphasis on the design of education, particularly aiming to shorten and streamline in-field training. It also introduced points of contact between campus-based and

field-based components. However, implementation was largely delegated to individual police stations, with no central oversight of probationers' in-field training. Subsequent committee reports noted that the division of responsibilities between the Police Academy and police stations was poorly addressed. This disconnect, combined with the learning objectives' emphasis on an effective introduction to the police profession, resulted in in-field training becoming oriented toward student assessment. It also becomes apparent that this disconnect between the increasingly autonomous police education and the Police Authority has been cemented and deepened, which has consequences for subsequent implementations.

3.5 The rebirth of the separated model in 1998

In the 1990s, the police underwent a period of rapid reform and renewal. These reforms coincided with a general economic crisis and demands for austerity. As a result, in 1995, the government halted all new police recruitment and eliminated salary compensation for police education. Instead, police students were required to finance their studies through student loans. The government subsequently concluded that future police education and recruitment needed reassessment and issued a directive for further investigation, which ultimately resulted in the design of the 1998 police education program.

Two committees worked sequentially on the issue. The Ministry of Justice Committee first laid the groundwork (Justitiedepartementet, 1996), followed by the National Board of Police Committee, which focused on implementation (RPS, 1997). Influenced by American and British models of community and problem-oriented policing, their goal was to create a police force capable of assessing local crime, conducting complex investigations, and engaging in international cooperation. The reform also aimed to attract underrepresented groups, such as women and immigrants, by aligning police education with university standards (Justitiedepartementet, 1996).

The Ministry of Justice Committee proposed a 10 month university-based program, followed by a three-month course at the Police Academy, where students could specialize in general policing or investigation. While recognizing the importance of in-field training, the committee deemed the in-field training too lengthy and recommended streamlining through the education of probationer supervisors and refined learning objectives. The Community Practice component was also to be shortened and emphasize practice at the prosecutor's office (Justitiedepartementet, 1996, pp. 85–87).

The National Police Board Committee concurred with the Ministry of Justice Committee both that the in-field training was too long and inefficient, and that community service should be reduced (RPS, 1997). However, it rejected the university-police academy split, instead advocating for a unified, two-year Police Academy program with focus on problem-oriented learning. This was to be followed by six months of in-field training under probationary employment, with student loans funding the academic phase and salaries covering the practical phase. This separation was intended to promote merit-based competition for placements. Stricter recruitment criteria aimed to reduce the need for aptitude assessment during in-field training (RPS, 1997).

The Police Training Ordinance was amended in 1997 to facilitate changes, and a new Police Training Ordinance was enacted in 1999 (SFS, 1999). These changes legally clarified the distinction between being a student in the police program and being employed as a salaried probationer. Another key aspect of the reform was the centralization of police recruitment, along with the introduction of standardized aptitude tests and psychological evaluations (Annell, 2015, pp. 8–10).

The legal revisions were followed by a complex implementation process. After a two-year recruitment moratorium, police education resumed at the Police Academy in 1998. Efforts to align it with universities led to the launch of police programs at Umeå University (2000) and Växjö University (2001), with a distance learning option introduced in 2002 (Karp & Lauritz, 2021).

The national curriculum, set by the Police Authority, emphasized problem-oriented learning. In the reform, Community Practice was replaced by “study-integrated workplace orientation” (SAO), a five-credit course with its own learning objectives, spanning two years. Students visited local police districts, partner authorities, and civil society organizations (PHS, 2001). However, logistical challenges led to its gradual reduction and renaming as Field Studies (PHS, 2002, 2004, 2008). Eventually, it was further condensed into a one-week police station observation, which remains part of the program today. In this way, community practice was quietly integrated into the school-based education.

The in-field training was rebranded as six months of Probationary Training Education, highlighting its own syllabus and the involvement of educated supervisors (RPS, 2000). The Police Authority struggled with its organization; development of national learning objectives for the probationary training period, education of the supervisors, and national assessment criteria went slow. Internal audits from 2000, 2002 and 2005 point out that there is still a lack of national directives and that the overall responsibility for education as a whole is unclear (SOU, 2008:39).

A consequence of this new organization was a reestablishment of a clear distinction between the school-based police program and the in-field training organized by police authorities. At the national level, there were explicit requirements for how in-field training should be designed. However, for local police stations, the requirements remained unclear directives, resulting in uncertainty and increased focus on goal achievement based on the national assessment template.

This reform, driven by the question whether police education should be further academicized, emphasized the importance of the pedagogical structuring of the program and, thus, also of the in-field training. However, it ultimately came to be shaped by demands for cutbacks. One consequence was that the overall length of the program was reduced, and more notably, in-field training was shortened from 18 to six months. This drastic reduction was intended to be managed through clearer and more centralized governance via policy documents, as well as through the training of FTOs and supervisors. Although the approach was comprehensive in intent, efforts to establish central oversight and follow-up within the organization proved sluggish, which in practice meant that implementation once again fell to individual police officers at local police stations—often without pedagogical training. Although the majority of police students took the step to become police officers, there was a lack of transparency into how the training proceeded or how the probationers experienced it. Limited communication and mutual distrust characterized the relationship between campus-based and practical training.

3.6A brief return to the integrated model in 2014

Momentum grew for integrating police education into higher education. In 2006, the government launched an inquiry to transform police training into a university program and explore differentiated entry paths to broaden recruitment, particularly for women and immigrants (Justitiedepartementet, 2006). A new government replaced the committee, and in 2008, the report *The Police Education of the Future* (SOU, 2008) was published. It

recommended integrating police education into the higher education system and rejected the idea of creating separate paths in basic police education.

The 2008 report briefly but critically addressed in-field training, noting that some police districts had introduced a “sixth semester” due to concerns that newly trained officers lacked essential skills. The report concluded that there was a consensus that the in-field training was too short to be meaningful, and that there was ongoing uncertainty about whether to consider probationers as staff or students in training. The committee again called for clearer educational objectives (SOU, 2008, p. 74). To address these issues, the report proposed reintegrating the in-field training into the police program as a practicum internship (VFU), extending it to two six-month semesters—the first time such an extension had been proposed. The first semester would provide a general foundation in policing, while the second would focus on investigative and preventive police tasks. Students would not be employed as police officers during this period, maintaining an emphasis on learning under university supervision (SOU, 2008, pp. 118–121).

At the same time, the Police Authority was preparing for a major organizational reform. The police had been criticized for being too ungovernable and decentralized, prompting a shift toward centralization. Regional police authorities merged into a single national entity, and the National Board of Police was replaced by a more accountable National Police Commissioner in 2015 (Ivarsson Westerberg, 2020). In 2014, a new Police Ordinance (SFS, 2014b) and Police Training Ordinance (SFS, 2014a) were enacted, along with a revised curriculum. In the wake of this reorganization, a full-fledged conversion to higher education was not carried out, but a number of changes in the direction of academization were implemented. The long-standing Police Academy in Solna was closed, and responsibility for offering basic police education was transferred to the general university system in the form of commissioned education, with a curriculum designed by the Police Authority. In 2015, police education in Stockholm opened at Södertörn University in Huddinge, south of Stockholm.

In the new curriculum, in-field training remained unchanged in length and was not converted into a practicum internship. However, it was reintegrated into the program, embedded in the final semester (PM, 2014). Minor adjustments included the introduction of a syllabus and national assessment criteria set by the Police Authority. To improve oversight and overall responsibility, the Police Authority also established the Education Council [*Utbildningsrådet*] to coordinate all parts of the education program. To meet the growing need for supervisors, university courses for probationer supervisors were introduced in Växjö and Umeå alongside existing courses at the Police Authority. This pedagogical program, consisting of five weeks of full-time study, underscored the recognition of in-field training as a vital part of police education.

3.7 Back again to the separated model in 2020

In 2015, the government commissioned another inquiry into police education, this time with an even more direct aim of integrating police education into the general higher education system. The committee was tasked with evaluating how police education at universities should be organized, with a specific focus on investigating the impact of practical training for policing skills within a university setting. The report, titled *The Police of the Future – Police Education as University Education*, was published a year later (SOU, 2016). This report, with its stated aspiration to academize the education, showed even greater care about how the pedagogical structure of in-field training would be designed, thereby further solidifying its key role in education. In the proposed course

structure, practicum internship was divided into two periods, similar to the 2008 inquiry's recommendations, but this time without an extension in time. Each of the two internship periods would span three instead of six months. The role of supervisors during in-field training was a key topic, especially in response to concerns about varying quality. In the same way as in the previous proposal, the universities would be responsible for the entire police education program, including assessment of in-field training, and students would be financed by student loans even during the in-field training (SOU, 2016, pp. 185–208).

However, neither of these recommendations were ever fully implemented. Political priorities shifted to drastically increasing the number of police officers, which placed the transfer of police education to universities lower on the agenda. In 2019, Malmö University and the University of Borås started to offer police education. Distance learning options were expanded, and new, compressed forms of basic police education were developed for specialists.

A new curriculum was introduced in 2020, in which the integration of the in-field training during the fourth semester was abolished, and it was once again placed after the university program (PM, 2020). This change was primarily due to practical challenges and pressure from the police union. The influx of probationers put a strain on police districts, which struggled to provide enough educated and experienced supervisors.

The 2008 and 2016 reports reflect a growing recognition of the importance of a pedagogically structured internship period to integrate theoretical knowledge with practical experience. This awareness has influenced reforms over the past two decades, resulting in national learning objectives, mandatory training for supervisors and FTOs, and a national support structure for in-field training.

Despite this progress, in-field training remains vulnerable to budget cuts and is still often treated as a secondary component. The divide between campus-based education and field training has widened, with learning objectives and assessments developed separately from the academic curriculum. Communication between universities and in-field training units is limited. Although the internship is formally part of the education, this is not always clear to students—or even to the police officers and FTOs involved. In 2024, the Police Authority discontinued its collaboration with universities on supervisor training, deciding it would proceed independently.

Also in 2024, the Swedish government announced the introduction of salary compensation for police students in 2025—a change likely to prompt further adjustments to the structure of police education.

4. Discussion: Polarization instead of integration

What is distinctive about the Swedish context is that in-field training cyclically alternates between being integrated into and separated from campus education. There seem to be two competing ideas about the purpose of in-field training that oscillate back and forth. One model that places it as an integrated part within the basic training. The idea is that probationers come back to school to reflect on their experiences and finish their education and then emerge as fully fledged police. This model can be seen in the 1967, the 1985 and the 2014 curriculum. The other model places the in-field training last as a proper probationary period with a focus on learning under tutelage and trial whether the probationers are fit for the task. This model can be seen in the 1972–1997 and 2020 curriculum. This alternation between either practice or introduction and trial shows that there is a lack of clarity about what the in-field training is supposed to contain.

This ambiguity runs throughout the historical analysis, and it characterizes the discussion about Swedish police education up to the present day.

One possible reason for this ambiguity could be the prolonged debate surrounding the academization of police education. Unlike Norway and Finland, Sweden has not undergone a full academization of its police training. Instead, over the past three decades, the Swedish police education system has been characterized by ongoing discussions about this transition. While these debates have contributed to a greater awareness of the pedagogical importance of the in-field training period, they have exacerbated the polarization between universities and police organizations and sparked conflicts over who should be responsible for shaping the police officers of the future. The design of police education has become a contentious issue, with in-field training being used as a point of contention in this debate.

According to Dreyfus and Dreyfus, the in-field training period is the most critical phase in vocational education, as it is during this time that students integrate theoretical and analytical knowledge with practical skills (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). If the centrality of in-field training is acknowledged, it should be designed to include structured and well-supported introductions, teaching, and constructive practice opportunities. This period could also serve as a platform for introducing current technologies and methodologies.

Currently, the Swedish Police Authority holds the right to examine the probationary training period. Through the independent assessment criteria of this phase, the authority ultimately determines what is required of a future police officer. However, a pressing issue today is the lack of sufficient resources to offer probationers meaningful opportunities to train, experiment, reflect, and make mistakes in line with Schön's conception of practical training. Furthermore, the Police Authority has not taken any explicit steps to strengthen the structure or pedagogical efficiency of in-field training. On the contrary, despite a steady increase in the number of probationers, there have been cuts to the training of probationary supervisors.

An alternative approach would be for universities to recognize the pivotal role of internships and assume responsibility for designing them as an integral part of police education. This would involve ensuring that probationers are provided with adequate opportunities for training and orientation. Although such a shift would pose significant challenges, it is not unfeasible. Successful models can be found in Finland and Norway, where police education has integrated internships into the curriculum and examination processes. Other professional fields, such as healthcare, also offer effective examples that could serve as inspiration.

The fact remains that neither the police education programs nor the Police Authority currently assume full responsibility for in-field training. It continues to be a neglected stumbling block, with both sides regarding its current design as insufficient.

Ultimately, the probationers bear the brunt of these organizational shortcomings. They are not afforded the full opportunity to develop the abilities expected of them. Although most probationers successfully complete their in-field training, this achievement often comes at the cost of high stress and feelings of inadequacy (Emsing et al., 2022). Furthermore, it is unfortunate that their initial exposure to actual police work is characterized by a recognition of the organization's deficiencies. This reinforces the perception that the Police Authority is unable to create an educational framework that comprehensively addresses the needs of the profession.

In Swedish police education, in-field training has primarily been viewed as a means of reproducing a specific type of police officer. The learning processes described by

Schön and Dreyfus and Dreyfus—namely, with the possibility to practice and genuine acquisition of the profession—have not been the focus during the latter half of the twentieth century. Although the notion of a more comprehensive approach has gradually emerged, it has yet to be fully developed within Swedish police education. We argue that in-field training must be understood in its full complexity and should encompass three essential components: introduction, assessment, and opportunities for training. Equally important is the need for both universities and police organizations to recognize its pivotal role. It is during the in-field training that police students transform abstract knowledge into concrete practice (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986), as well as learn to “see, think, and do” as police officers (Schön, 1987).

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