Being a Vocational Teacher in Sweden: Navigating the Regime of Competence for Vocational Teachers

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Abstract

Context: Vocational teachers are called to constantly meet the upcoming needs in social and working life. In Sweden, the high demand for vocational teachers has led to their recruitment in the early stages of vocational teacher studies or even before teacher training. Entering this new community of practice, vocational teachers cross boundaries between their previous occupation and their teaching job, mediating the introduction of competence between them. In this context, the study explores vocational teachers' competence through their own perceptions, addressing important competence areas, as well as how competence is understood.

Approach: The study employs a socio-cultural perspective on learning. Communities of practice establish their regime of competence, a set of principles and expectations that recognise membership. To be competent is translated as understanding the shared enterprise of the community, being capable and allowed to engage in it and, thus, interact with the other members and with the available resources. Hence, what is expected by members to know and to be is defined by the regime of competence and, hence, by the community. Comprised of 14 semi-structured interviews with vocational teachers in different vocational disciplines, employed both in upper secondary and adult education schools, the study adopts a qualitative research strategy. The research material was analysed thematically.

Findings: According to findings, important competence comprise of up-to-date vocational competence supporting the performance of vocational teaching, but also interpersonal

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competence, including good communication and the construction of a close relationship with the students. The student-teacher relationship serves as the basis to match students with their work placement, facilitating higher work-based training quality. Moreover, maintaining a continuous development attitude and openness to critique are crucial for teachers. Finally, teachers approach competence focusing on its relationship to action and performance, while also referring to its situated nature. Therefore, to be competent is understood differently in different practices (teaching and occupational), highlighting the importance of understanding the uniqueness and duality within the regime of competence of vocational teaching.

Conclusion: Teachers have described the importance of competence which was not developed during teacher training. Instead, important competences were often developed in the previous profession or informal teaching activities. Vocational teachers seem to value and utilise their previous occupational worker identities to a high extent. This should be considered when teacher training or in-service training is designed to support individuals in developing their (new) teacher identity.

Keywords: Professional Competence Development, Vocational Teachers, Communities of Practice, Vocational Education and Training, VET in Sweden, Workplace Learning

1   Introduction

In times of societal change, vocational teachers receive pressure to meet the upcoming social and work life demands by reshaping their practices (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Ketelaar et al., 2012). In Sweden, vocational teachers are expected to cooperate closer with industries and trades (Andersson et al., 2018; Köpsén & Andersson, 2017; Statens offentliga utredningar [Swedish Government Official Reports], 2008), turning the workplace into an essential element for the outcomes of Vocational Education and Training (VET) (Mårtensson et al., 2019). International research indicates that vocational teachers feel competent in their occupational area (Hofmann et al., 2014; Stephens, 2015), while they are positive with attending in-service training on general pedagogical competence (Canrinus et al., 2019) highlighting that although vocational competence is achieved, pedagogical or teaching competence is being developed in the teachers' workplace. Even in different VET systems, vocational teachers seem to deal with a duality regarding their identity and competence that is universal. This duality refers to a constant effort of balancing the teacher and the worker (e.g., Tapani & Salonen, 2019; Vloet et al., 2020). Understanding the complexity of teachers' work is necessary, if their professional development is to be supported (Billett, 2014). As part of teachers' competence is developed at work, understanding this complexity refers also to identifying what competence is seen as important in connection to work.

Previous research has stressed the connection between competence and identity, indicating that strengthening the first supports the development of the latter. Fejes and Köpsén (2014) highlighted the dual identity of vocational teachers as teachers and occupation experts, while Köpsén and Andersson (2018) investigated the role of continuous professional development in the formation of this identity. Mårtensson et al. (2019) explored the various roles teachers have in relation to the students' work placement, showing the multifaceted work reality of vocational teachers. This reality includes the support of a learning process with a current and future orientation, where both technical and interactional competence are needed for teachers and students (Asplund et al., 2021).

In the Swedish VET, the high demand for vocational teachers has led to recruitment in the early stages of their teacher studies or sometimes even earlier (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014). Vocational teachers often start working while studying, entering the new working environment not always knowing what to expect. The transition from a craftsman to a teacher is an individual journey, where teachers find their own ways of being. Entering the vocational teacher community in this unregulated way often means teachers are developing professional competence while negotiating with the rest of the community members on what is important. The interplay between their participation and reification leads to a social history of learning with a set of criteria for membership (Wenger, 2010). Hence, participants learn and at the same time define what is important, encapsulated in the regime of competence, a set of principles and expectations that recognise membership (Wenger, 1998). The selection of specific competence deemed as important for the teaching profession is crucial in strengthening the teachers' identity not only on an individual, but also a collective level. This is especially true when considering that vocational teachers as a group have not yet achieved a clear sense of their professionalism (Köpsén, 2014; Maurice-Takerei, 2015).

The ageing of teachers, the lack of vocational teacher-students, and the high teacher demands in Swedish VET create a shortage. This shortage is distributed unequally within regions and programmes (Berglund et al., 2017). In upper secondary schools, 56.5% of the vocational teachers are qualified (National Agency of Education [NAE], 2020a). In adult education, the percentage reaches up to 66.7% (NAE, 2020b). This percentage also varies between programmes, with 67.7% of the vocational teachers in the nursing programme being qualified, while for the HVAC and property maintenance programme[1] the percentage is 36.7% (Berglund et al., 2017; NAE, 2020a). Teaching qualifications can be acquired by completing vocational teacher training (90 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System [ECTS]). When receiving teaching qualifications, candidates' vocational education and previous work experience are validated. Teachers become qualified for teaching specific vocational subjects, and not qualified for teaching in vocational programmes. Due to the differences between occupations, validation occurs separately in each case (Asghari & Berglund,

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1   HVAC: Heating, ventilation and air conditioning.

2020). In vocational teacher research in Sweden, learning, knowledge and, thus, competence has been seen as situated in a specific community of practice, the vocational practice (Köpsén & Andersson, 2017, 2018; Mårtensson et al., 2019).

In contrast to other teacher groups, vocational teachers bring their previous vocational knowledge into their teaching practice both through formal and informal learning, which complicates the process of developing and defining their teacher identity. Furthermore, vocational teachers are expected to maintain parts of their previous identity, for example their occupational competence, and expand it by transforming it into a new (teacher) identity (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén & Andersson, 2017).

Consequently, vocational teachers constantly cross boundaries (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014), while trying to connect different "forms of competence whose claim to knowledge may or may not be compatible" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 18). At the intersections of these boundaries, competence become blurred. The current study explores how vocational teachers' competence is perceived by vocational teachers in Sweden, while also mapping the professional competence of vocational teachers and its connection to everyday teaching activities. Competence for vocational teachers is approached and described through teacher's own perceptions answering:

1. How is competence understood and perceived by vocational teachers in relation to their work?

2. What competence is important for vocational teaching practice and how is it described?

For the present study, competence is approached in relationship to learning, not only as its result, but as the instant capture of the learning process, its outcome combined with its further potential.

2   Theoretical Framework

This study is inspired by theories related to socio-cultural perspectives on learning, competence development, and identity (Wenger, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 100) suggest "that learning occurs through centripetal participation in the learning community of the ambient community", and refer to Communities of Practice (CoP) understanding learning as a "trajectory into a community" instead of an individual cognitive task. Including knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, professional competence is connected to action, while it has a distinct developmental and situated character (Antera, 2019). In other words, competence, "the individual's capacity to actualise a specific activity in a given situation and context" (Antera et al., 2022, p. 78), is manifested through action and it can be developed, while its limits are defined by the context in which it is constructed and negotiated.

Participation, according to Wenger (1998), is the social experience of membership and active engagement in social communities and enterprises. Participation is linked with belonging and occurs on the personal and social level. Located in the middle ground between the social and the individual, identity is approached as an outcome of participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Identity is, hence, perceived as a self-understanding, which derive from who one is in relation to others in a given context, but also from what one attributes to themselves in relation to their memberships.

Engagement in social life combines feeling, thinking and acting, and involves meaning making, which comes as a result of the interaction of participation and reification (Wenger, 2010). Reification describes the construction of concrete objects as the result of solidifying experience into "thingness" (Wenger, 1998, p. 58), for instance the publication of articles about the community's actions. Through the creation of these objects, points around which the negotiation of meaning occurs are created. Participation and reification are different; still complementary (Wenger, 2010). In the case of VET, teachers participate directly in teaching activities, staff meetings and reflections on their work, while they simultaneously construct conceptual artefacts, like course plans and teaching strategies. These different forms of reification reflect a shared practice and experience which are the basis to organise participation within VET teaching. It is this interplay between participation and reification, which creates the regime of competence (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

CoP establish their *regime of competence*, a set of principles and expectations that recognise membership. In other words, to be competent is translated as understanding the shared enterprise of the community, being capable and allowed to engage in it and, thus, interact with the other members and with the available resources (Wenger, 2010). Hence, what is expected of members to know and to be is defined by the regime of competence and, therefore, by the community (Wenger, 1998). Consequently, competence cannot be perceived as disconnected from the practice, as it "… is by its very practice – not by other criteria – that a community establishes what is to be a competent participant, an outsider, or somewhere in between" (Wenger, 1998, p. 137).

Vocational teachers' competence is situated in a specific community of practice, the vocational practice. In other words, in order to teach a vocational subject, teachers should develop knowledge and skills within the area of teaching, but also competence within the main field of the vocational practice. Competence development, as well as the formation of a professional identity are achieved through several boundary-crossings between the occupational and the teaching practice. As brokers, vocational teachers introduce ideas from their work in the teaching landscape, connecting practices and facilitating cross-boundary experiences. Brokering activities are legitimised by an institutional authority or a CoP. They can affect and shape the regime of competence as the role of broker is to translate, coordinate and align different perspectives and meanings (Wenger, 1998).

Guided by the research questions, the study seeks to identify points of importance for teachers, which are expressed as competence demands in their everyday work, formulating the regime of competence. CoP provide the context in which competence is investigated, offering insights on how members, communities and landscapes influence the regime of competence. The regime of competence developed through the CoP is then used as a conceptual framework to interpret the findings.

3 Methods

This study has a qualitative research design. The research material was collected through semi-structured interviews, a flexible instrument, allowing the interviewees to steer the discussion to issues of importance for themselves (Bryman, 2012). The interviews took place online via Zoom[2] from May to October 2021. Their duration varied from 32 to 74 minutes. All interviews were video/audio recorded and transcribed[3] verbatim. Personal data has been protected, according to the regulations by Stockholm University (2020).

In total 14 interviews with vocational teachers in different vocational disciplines were performed. Teachers worked both in upper secondary and adult education schools. Regarding demographics, Table 1 provides the informants' details about gender, teacher training, type of school and vocational programme.

Table 1: Informants' Details

Informant	Gender	Vocational Programme	Vocational Teacher Training	School Type
Teacher 1	Female	Hotel and tourism	Completed	Upper-secondary school
Teacher 2	Male	Restaurant management and food	Completed	Adult school
Teacher 3	Male	Restaurant management and food	Completed	Adult school
Teacher 4	Male	Restaurant management and food	Completed	Upper-secondary special education school
Teacher 5	Female	Health and social care	Completed	Upper-secondary school
Teacher 6	Male	Restaurant management and food	Completed	Upper-secondary school

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2 Exception is interview 5 (in person).

3 Interview 5 audio file was partly destroyed. Research material derives from the 20-minute audio file and the researcher's notes.

Teacher 7	Female	Health and social care	Undergoing	Upper-secondary school
Teacher 8	Female	Child and recreation	Completed	Adult school
Teacher 9	Female	Business and administration	Completed	Upper-secondary school
Teacher 10	Female	Health and social care	Completed	Adult school
Teacher 11	Female	Health and social care	Undergoing	Adult school
Teacher 12	Male	Handicraft (dance programme)	Completed	Upper-secondary school
Teacher 13	Male	Health and social care	Not completed	Upper-secondary school
Teacher 14	Female	Handicraft (hair and make-up programme)	Completed	Upper-secondary school

The informants' age varied from 30 to 59 years and their teaching experience from 2 to 22 years. In their previous occupation, they have worked from 7 to 28 years. 11 teachers had completed vocational teacher training, whereas 2 were undergoing studies, when the interviews occurred. With reference to school types, 8 teachers were employed in upper secondary schools, including one in a special education school, and the rest in adult education centers.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Potential interviewees' contact details were collected from school websites and a list of vocational teachers collaborating with Stockholm University. Potential interviewees were informed about the study and gave their consent prior to interviewing. All information details of individuals or schools are hidden with the use of numbers. All information is stored in secure location.

3.1 Analysis

With an inductive approach, the study started from the research material, searching for recurring patterns. The transcripts were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step was the familiarisation with the material (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a second step, initial codes were generated and a line-by-line coding was followed. Codes are the most basic segments of raw data with a meaning (Boyatzis, 1998) and are indicative of a feature that presents some interest for the analyst (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this stage, codes like leadership, calmness, openness to critique and updated vocational knowledge were generated in relationship to important competence. This first selection of codes was applied to all transcripts. The researcher performed a review round to ensure reliable and consistent coding (Saldana, 2009). New codes were added and older ones were reviewed.

In the third step, codes served as the basis to create themes. Themes are recurring patterns that capture something important or interesting in the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Comparing the initial codes, the researcher realised that the importance of competence acquired meaning in the context of specific tasks. Moreover, embarking from the idea

that learning is situated, it was to be examined in relation to the context it is developed and practiced in. In other words, the importance of the context for understanding the themes was supported both by the theory (situated learning) and the method (thematic analysis) (Clarke & Braun, 2006). For this study, vocational teachers' regime of competence was explored in relationship to the teachers' duties. For instance, communication, was associated with inter-personal competence, as it related mostly with approaching students, rather than teaching them. *Interpersonal competence* although connected with teaching, was a separate theme, due to its frequency and importance for the informants. Codes were often associated with more than one theme (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

In step four, themes and subthemes were reviewed and modified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Some subthemes were overlapping. For example, openness to critique and continuous development attitude were discussed always in relationship to each other and, thus, were unified under continuous development attitude. The themes and the findings were structured based on theoretical concepts. Finally, the themes and subthemes were investigated with reference to their relationships. The researcher explored the proximity of themes and subthemes in the text, especially its frequency, and tried to understand the themes connection with the practice they were presented in.

3.2   Limitations

The findings of this study are limited by two factors, the conditions of the interviews and the profile of the informants. Interviews were conducted in English with the occasional use of Swedish words or phrases[4]. The second limitation addresses the profile of informants, most of which had been or were currently undergoing vocational teacher training. That implies a potential positive stance towards professional development.

Conducting interviews via a digital platform has influenced the discussion outcome, since the creation of a trust environment became more challenging. Nevertheless, the informants were already accustomed to digital platforms, introduced in their work life a year before the interviews. Furthermore, informants were offered in person meetings when the travel distance allowed, but most of them preferred online meetings, due to intense work schedules.

Interviews served as a useful tool in the reflection of teachers' actions in their practice. The researcher's partial understanding of the Swedish language allowed informants to speak Swedish whenever they felt uncomfortable in English. By introducing this possibility in the beginning of the interviews, the researcher created the ground to ask clarifications for terms and nuances in the Swedish language that were not fully understandable. However, restricted language skills might have discouraged potential informants from accepting the invitation for discussion. The language barrier triggered more effort for clarifications, with the

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4 Interview 7 occurred in Greek.

interviewees providing examples and contextualising their answers. Indeed, several teachers reflected on their actions, the reasons behind them and their meaning for their practice before the interviews, some of them by preparing notes as well. However, as interview material remains a verbalised version of individual thoughts, observations or analysis of objects, like lessons plans, could offer a better insight. Unfortunately, COVID19 restrictions and language limitations refrained the collection of further material.

4   Findings

Analysing the vocational teachers' perception of the concept of competence, the study identified three aspects of competence, the action aspect, the situatedness, and developmental aspect. Furthermore, addressing the question of what competence is important for vocational teachers, the study revealed themes prevalent in the research material, including vocational teaching, interpersonal competence, continuous development, and work placement related competence (student work placement – APL[5]).

4.1   Understanding Competence

For the majority of teachers, competence is perceived as the result of education and experience, in an understanding parallel to formal competence and experience whose interplay tends to promote learning (Wenger, 1998).

4.1.1 Competence as Action

In addition to how competence is developed, it is expected to be manifested to other people, stressing the importance of demonstrating and not just acquiring knowledge.

> It's a mixture of theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge, and as a teacher, you have to be able to förmedla [mediate], to express it to other people as well. We all had that professor who couldn't teach, extremely boring, but a lot of knowledge. So you have to have both sides. (Teacher 11)

Approaching competence as the ability to translate the teacher's work experience in teaching is the most common understanding of the concept. In all interviews, the need to demonstrate competence through application in everyday work is apparent, highlighting the importance of the context for competence and the fact the latter is seen as action, elements of competence present in previous research (Antera, 2021). Furthermore, teachers discussed their professional freedom, often reporting feeling confident about their expertise, since

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5   APL is an abbreviation for Arbetsplatsförlagt lärande and it refers to workplace learning.

students, colleagues and principals had been giving them positive feedback for their work. This attitude confirms that competence is seen through action and performance, while it highlights the importance of legitimacy within the community of practice, which is gained when competence is acknowledged within performance.

4.1.2 The Situated Aspect of Competence

In her interview, Teacher 14 brought up an aspect of competence, not directly addressed by other teachers. For her, competence meant an ability to understand the situation, including the people involved, the norms, and the conditions given.

> Even if you are, for example in the profession and you're meeting a client, or if you as a teacher, meeting a student, I think the willingness of, to like understand where this person comes from or what they want and what they have with them as skills or competence. (Teacher 14)

Being able to see the full picture and understand the context makes someone competent. In that sense, competence is relational to the environment and the people in it, and hence situated. When referring to professional competence then, the professional context is perceived as a combination of the professional practice, the members, and the community around it.

The context has a key role in confirming the existence of expertise and competence. Therefore, competence in communities of practice is not only individual or collective. Instead, it is the instant capture of an ongoing negotiation over what is important for the practice through the lenses of the community members. This negotiation is situated in space and time. Competence of importance for the community becomes part of the regime of competence (Wenger, 1998).

Nevertheless, as stated by Teacher 11, individuals might prefer competence excluded from the regime of competence (dis-identification). In this case, their sense of belonging in the community is weaker.

> But my colleagues say no no no Teacher11, you are telling too much, you have to keep, keep on the basics, only. And it's very difficult to me. Because I know a little bit too much maybe for this level. And.... for me also, a very big demand is that, to accept the low level. (Teacher 11)

4.1.3 The Developmental Aspect of Competence

The developmental aspect of competence was expressed through the focus in continuous learning reported by teachers. Teacher 12 stated that "The day I lose my curiosity, the day I lose my, I lose mine desire for more knowledge, it will be the day I stop.". While curiosity is a

key motive for development, another aspect of this developmental nature is the capacity for self-awareness.

> Instead of feeling angry or fall out to the student, you can say, all right, I have no idea. Good question. Let's talk about that next next week. That's a good teacher for me. You don't have to know everything. You have to know where your knowledge starts, begins, and stops. (Teacher 10)

In other words, with a clear picture of one's own knowledge and skills, teaching and learning are better facilitated within action.

Moreover, teachers described exercising competence, which was obtained in different settings, in their teaching jobs. These competences have been developing over time, usually during extracurricular activities. Their introduction to the teaching job has been soft and subconscious, according to teachers. Self-awareness, as reported above, might be vital in exploring these previous teaching experiences and realising their impact on current practices.

4.2   Vocational Teaching

Vocational teaching includes planning and teaching in both theoretical and practical classes, assessing, as well as mentoring the students, and in some cases also designing curricula. With reference to vocational knowledge and courses, the informants reported teaching up to 13 different courses, while they should, additionally, remain informed on the current trends in their respective occupation.

A feeling of belonging to the teaching community is expressed, when teachers mention how rewarding it is to watch their students evolve and become professionals.

> Some of them are really demanding, and if when you put the effort, and then you get, get the change, that's really rewarding. When you see someone success in some way and you know you've been a part of it, that's really rewarding. (Teacher 4)

Holding the overall responsibility of vocational teaching, teachers feel a bigger share in the learning outcome of the students, regarding not only the grades, but also their development as professionals.

4.2.1 Vocational Competence and Remaining Updated on the Occupation

Concerning professional competence, teachers claim that a deep understanding of their occupation and more specifically the knowledge in it, is the basis for teaching it further. In this competence, the innate interest for the occupation is the driving force for remaining updated, but also for teaching the occupation to students. Therefore, teachers feel accountable to at least two regimes of competence, the occupational and the teaching one. Keeping vocational

knowledge updated is a key competence for all informants, while its significance is prevalent in the previous research too (Antera et al., 2022; Mårtensson et al., 2019).

> I work extra on evenings and weekends. Because I don't want to lose my connection with the work. I still think is very fun to take care of customers. And this communication and service and everything that comes with customers. I like it, I still like it. And I think it's very important for me to still be in them in the yrket [occupation]. Because if I lose that, what can I compare it to? (Teacher 9)

Maintaining up-to-date competence is usually achieved by working part time in the previous occupation, having contact with the supervisors of the students' placements and looking for material on different sources. In addition to the individual initiative for learning, Teachers 11, 12 and 13 stated that the vocational knowledge teachers have should be higher than the level of what they teach and should be certified (e.g., licenced nurse or physiotherapist). For those teachers, tertiary level vocational training should be a requirement for teacher recruitment.

Describing school management, Teacher 13 stressed that principals without vocational experience might underestimate the value of VET and the importance of certified vocational competence for VET teachers.

> So yeah, you have health care, but they don't know what that that's inside that. They just see it as a course. Sometimes you think can we just pick the person from the street? No, you cannot pick a person from the street to do this. Then perhaps is more difficult to understand why do you need higher education to do this.

Describing his discussion with the school principal, Teacher 13 also added "Would you hire a Swedish teacher or history teacher that only went to high school? (translation by the author). No, no. Why would I do that? Why are you thinking of doing that in healthcare, you cannot do that."

Overall, teachers suggest that the principals cannot evaluate neither their vocational nor their teaching competence, as "they lack knowledge about vocational programs. And it's, it has become more and more obvious" (Teacher 1). Therefore, they focus on formalities, like qualifications, and on the outcome of teaching, meaning good grades. As Teacher 7 states "what interests her [the principal] is the result, that I have a good result. If I don't have a good result, it shows on the students who will complain, it shows on the student grades, it shows on many things" (translation by the author). This creates low trust from the teacher to the management, but also more freedom for the teacher. Teachers ground their decisions on their vocational or teaching competence. That strengthens the feeling of expertise, but not the feeling of belonging in the school community, as teachers feel that others in the school do not understand their work and needs.

Participation in the vocational teaching practice is not sufficient; nor is recognition of good work. Teachers need to see their competence valued in various different ways. With the school principals being mostly peripheral members of the vocational teacher community, their opinion is not as valued regarding the regime of competence. Nevertheless, their role in the school and their power to legitimise and shape the regime raises their importance and enacts teachers to negotiate about what the regime should include. Giving vocational teachers' CoP voice and the legitimacy to influence decisions with their knowledge can benefit the school with increased retention of talent (Wenger et al., 2002).

4.3 Interpersonal Competence: Student-Teacher Relationship and Communication

Interpersonal competences, enacted when individuals interact with each other, support the development of relationships among individuals. According to Buhrmester et al. (1988) five competence types are important in interpersonal situations, namely relation initiation, assertiveness, self-revelation, handling conflict and emotional support. These refer both to initiating relations, and maintaining them. Key for the work of teachers, interpersonal competence development is based on opening up and trusting others (Britton et al., 2017; Han & Son, 2020).

Interpersonal competence was discussed as essential for achieving a close relationship with students. This relationship was perceived as the basis for every other task to be achieved, as it has a crucial role in teaching, social life, students' placement, and teachers' own development. Interpersonal competence contains two areas, communication and developing a personal student-teacher relationship, with both being interrelated and often the first acting as the introduction to the latter. Communication is described on an initial level, as clarity, especially with reference to the learning goals and the teaching methods, but also as the ability to remain calm and handle conflict. For the nurse-teachers and the child and youth programme teacher these competences have been developed in their previous profession. In this competence area, teachers also included leadership, which they developed in previous jobs.

Developing a close student-teacher relationship is further significant, since trust is important for brokering (Wenger, 1998). This relationship refers to approaching students as individuals, knowing what is important for them (e.g. their issues and interests) (Vloet et al., 2020), and building a relationship of trust, where the teacher is an advisor and a supporter. For Teacher 9 this relationship is the basis for achieving further goals, allowing her to set the limits, gain students' respect and attention. In other words, becoming an important-other for the students is the ground for openness; students consider the teacher's advice due to a relationship of respect and trust.

> Basically I think that's the most interesting part and I think that, well I think that the, my center is about trying to evolve the students into reasonable adults. And I think the chef part, or the cooking part is a good way of reaching them. But I think the most important part is getting them to grow up and be nice people. So I think the cooking part, even though it's my profession from the beginning, it's quite a small part in the whole school thing. (Teacher 4)

According to Teacher 4, the student-teacher relationship is crucial, because the main goal of education is to develop "nice people" first and then good professionals. Prioritising the social aspect of learning and, thus, of teaching, vocational teachers identify primarily as teachers and secondary as occupation experts. Indeed, most of the informants declared themselves as teachers, with the exceptions only among novice teachers emphasising both identities. As the teachers mentioned, the transition from the occupational worker to the teacher occurred in the first 3 years of their teaching and it was recurrent participation in the teaching practice combined with limited participation in the occupational practice that lead them there. This participation increased both commitment and competence for the teaching profession. Moreover, acceptance by their new working environment, by students and colleagues reinforced this transition.

4.3.1 Supporting With Special Pedagogy

Concerning creating a close relationship to students, vocational teachers often discussed their role as curators and/or special pedagogues. Although not part of the teaching practice according to them, teachers feel accountable to help their students in any way possible. Describing student groups as with "messy backgrounds", including "diagnoses", not speaking Swedish, lacking previous education and having several other life issues, it seems that the role of a supporter is inevitably needed.

> We've got at the moment two students with ADHD[6] and that's another challenge for us because they are very square in their minds and how they think… and the big challenge there is how to get them not to follow a recipe point for point. (Teacher 2)

The main challenge Swedish vocational teachers face is students with the need for extra support (Antera et al., 2022). According to the interviews, this support is directed to students with diverse needs emerging from different education levels, low language skills, different cultural backgrounds, but also students with social, psychological or economic challenges at home.

> I think we are a bit special education teachers. Our students have a messy background when it comes to school. Some of them are really low in confidence. And we have to… a big part of our work is to restore the confidence to the school system or "I can do this" and just help them, support. (Teacher 10)

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6 Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

In relationship to this challenge, the teachers refer to their lack of competence in special pedagogy. They claim that special pedagogy can support them in dealing with student diversity, providing their students with what they need, arguing the importance of this competence upon students' needs (see also Colliander, 2019). At the same time, teachers feel that the knowledge on special pedagogy received during their teacher training is not sufficient, as shown in previous research as well (e.g., Berglund et al., 2017). Opposed to this approach is the view of Teacher 14, a qualified special educator, working part time as special pedagogue. She claims that to deal with the different student needs, didactics are sufficient. Special pedagogy is of help, but its focus is more tailored on learning difficulties and not challenges of socio-economic nature.

Altogether, the rising importance of special pedagogy is an indication of teachers negotiating the regime of competence within vocational teaching practice. While this knowledge is already part of the teacher training, the insisting for further development sets it higher in the agenda. Either by deliberately developing special pedagogy competence or by indirectly applying its principles, acting like informal special pedagogues, vocational teachers negotiate the importance of special education and give rise to its practice, since it is the practitioners' actions that can only produce a practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

4.4   Continuous Development Attitude and Activity

The positive stance of teachers towards continuous development is obvious when perceiving openness to critique and feedback as attitudes contributing to constant development and growing. This critique can be initiated in students or teachers, but students' opinion is more appreciated. In the same line of thought, a continuous development attitude expresses the avoidance of stagnation and the need for constant improvement. The basic requirement is teachers accepting that they cannot and they do not know everything and, thus, there is always room for improvement.

Another aspect of continuous development attitude is the teachers' desire to see others growing and to support them in this process. In the following quote, the value of development and supporting others to develop becomes intertwined with the teaching identity and profession.

> And then, I think a willing to get to know people and to develop them. And a willing to always make everything better, I think. I don't know, we had some, as I said, we have a lot of students coming to us, teacher students working with us. And I think the ones who do best is the ones who are genuinely interested in the students, who get a good contact with them. Because especially if they are up to third grade I don't... they see through you. And if you are not into genuinely want them to succeed, they won't let you in and let you see what they do. (Teacher 4)

In relationship to continuous development, vocational teachers often participate in formal learning activities and develop themselves with individual non-formal learning. Formal learning in schools takes place in groups or individually, with the two main topics being how to handle non-Swedish speaking students and students with learning disabilities. Other subthemes centre around teaching students from different cultures, pedagogical planning, classroom management, bullying, digitalisation, student motivation and building a shared school vision. These topics are decided in collaboration between teachers and principals. With principals managing resources necessary for teachers' professional development, their role in facilitating teachers' learning intensifies (Ballangrud & Nilsen, 2021).

Development on the previous occupation competence is supported by the school, but left to be planned by individual teachers. However, most teachers experienced the need to remain updated as a responsibility of their own. Several teachers were dissatisfied with the limited support they receive from the school about occupational competence development, commenting that "They don't value. We do it on our own because all we have an interest in in what we do. We are… it's not the school that offers that offers that, it's our own, on our own initiative." (Teacher 13). In this case, teachers started selling their services as health professionals to the municipality, gaining money for conference participation. This commercialisation of their competence is an example of reification, an action the importance of which was negotiated by the teachers and solidified into a service product.

4.5   Work Placement Related Competence: Finding and Matching Workplaces With Students

Regarding student work placements (APL), vocational teachers are assigned with finding the workplaces, matching them with students, coordinating and evaluating the learning process. Matching the students with the workplaces creates better conditions for the students' engagement. This require that the teacher has already established a good student-teacher relationship and is able to understand the students' competence and interest. Although a combination of interpersonal competence and vocational knowing, this theme is distinct because it includes some type of critical thinking in the decision making. Making a choice that is appropriate in the given situation is not as obvious, when issues of vocational knowledge or interpersonal relations are discussed.

> I have a lot of network that I have built up. So I know that because it is very much about matching the place with the student. I can't, I can't put every student on every place, it will not end well. (Teacher 9)

So I need to match. Because if the student is comfortable there, and like the handledare (supervisor), he will probably go there. If he doesn't like the handledare (supervisor), he doesn't like the working place, he will not go there. (Teacher 9)

The APL activity is seen as crucial but time-consuming and tiring, introducing a strain on the relationship between the teachers' professional identity and this work element. Matching the students with the workplaces is vital for teachers, in order to achieve the desired outcome and fulfil part of their identity. For the majority of the teachers, keeping a network of contacts with previous colleagues and local business owners facilitates the arrangement of good student placements. Some teachers use these contacts only for student placements, while others remain also informed on occupation updates via these connections. This emphasises the need for double membership, in the teaching and in the occupational community.

In comparison to subject teachers, vocational teachers seem to have more time with students and, thus, are able to create closer relationships with them. Teachers feel confident providing students with the necessary occupational competence for their APL. However, they sometimes feel insecure about the results of the matchmaking, indicating that their occupational competence is established, while their teaching competence, and thus their ability to understand the student needs, is still negotiated.

Teacher 14 has extensively discussed the challenge of raising the importance of APL, when the hours allocated for it are not included in the schedule for both teachers and students. This administrative hindrance seems to create an overload for teachers and lower the value of APL for students. A tension between the role of a teacher and of an administrator/ APL coordinator is noticed. While all teachers consider the students' work placement central in their work and crucial for their students, parts of it are administrative and not teaching tasks. Although teachers accept the roles of r*ecruiter, matchmaker* and *firefighter* (Mårtensson et al., 2019) in relationship to student work placement, they express dissatisfaction for the administrator role.

You know my salary is a lot better than an administrator. So why use ten, ten hours of my week to do… to send a letter or make a phone call. I don't know, is not good use for the money. (Teacher 10)

As suggested by previous research (e.g., Vähäsantanen & Hämäläinen, 2019), that often creates a tense relationship between their commitment to realise quality training for students and the distraction caused by administrative work. Finally, the size of the school affects the teachers' duties. In bigger schools, the APL coordination is assigned to specific teachers. Hence, vocational teachers can focus on the design and the evaluation of the learning process. These conditions are seen as positive.

Vocational teachers are given the important task of organising the APL process and, thus, the legitimacy to do it. Once the task is completed, teachers gain accountability. When

teachers maintain a clear teaching profile, free from administrative tasks, it becomes easier to achieve accountability for performing the APL task. Participation in any duty alone is not sufficient. Teachers' self-esteem and intrinsic learning motivation increases when they are given relevant, interesting and varying tasks (Hofmann et al., 2014). Teachers want to participate in processes that are of importance to the teaching identity, in order to develop competence high in the regime of competence of vocational teaching practice and, hence, strengthen their legitimacy.

5   Discussion

Acknowledging the importance of vocational teachers' learning, this study presented findings answering how vocational teachers perceive competence in their profession, addressing what competence areas are important and how they are described by teachers.

Important competence for vocational teachers, constituting the backbone of their *regime of competence*, include up-to-date vocational competence combined with legitimised teaching competence, continuous development attitude, interpersonal competence and matchmaking in APL (for a detailed list of competencies within these areas see Antera et al., 2022). The need for constantly up-to-date competence in both the occupational and teaching area, and the negotiation of what defines a good teacher indicate that the regime of competence is influenced by various actors and characterised by a dynamic and transformative nature. The continuous development attitude highlights the developmental aspect of the regime, meaning the urge to improve the members, but also the practice, making it more relevant to the context. Finally, the importance of understanding others and the occupation (interpersonal competence & APL matchmaking) suggests the vital role of the context in which the CoP perform and the regime of competence is valid. "We become who we are by being able to play a part in the relations of engagement that constitute our community" (Wenger, 1998, p. 152).

From the theoretical point of view, reflecting on how the *regime of competence* is shaped, this study sheds light on the introduction of competence developed in the previous occupation into teaching and the negotiation over its solidification. In other words, the mutual dynamics between the individual subjective experience and the influence of the collective, encapsulated in the established community understanding of teaching, are highlighted. Teachers feel confident with the regime of competence prevalent in their previous occupation and they assume legitimacy based on it, for example, when novice teachers can design parts of the vocational curricula. When encountering challenges in teaching, teachers apply strategies that have been successful for them before, utilising competence developed in other settings (Sarastuen, 2020; Stephens, 2015), mostly informal teaching activities and previous occupations. The success of this application raises their accountability and, thus, legitimacy and it supports them when negotiating the introduction and reification of the respective competence in the

regime of competence. In this study, competence developed in other settings and used in teaching include handling people (e.g., patients), scaffolding their independence, motivating, and resolving conflict.

Comparing the regime of competence in the previous and the current occupation, an imbalance becomes obvious. Occupational experience and vocational knowledge acquired during previous studies and work is deeply rooted in vocational teachers, who are accustomed to a production rather than learning function (Moodie & Wheelahan, 2012). The certified and acknowledged vocational competence of teachers boosts their confidence, creating their safe area, while it offers a better point of negotiation than other professions. Hence, they enter the vocational teaching practice landscape as partly equipped members (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). For instance, up-to-date vocational knowledge and network of industry contacts are parts of the regime of competence for vocational teachers. They can be novice teachers, yet they are experts within their occupations (Eick, 2009) and that can affect the power dynamics between peripheral and centripetal participation. Because vocational teachers have already established part of the regime of competence from their occupational experience, they are able to have some legitimacy and influence within the greater regime of vocational teaching.

On the contrary, their teaching competence might not be recognised yet (März & Kelchtermans, 2020). Participating in teacher duties or holding a teacher certificate is not enough to grant legitimacy. Vocational teachers need to keep their vocational knowledge updated and develop their teaching competence, in a constant effort to prove their vocational teaching expertise and gain membership in the community. The freedom and autonomy some of them enjoy, stems from their vocational expertise and rarely from their teaching expertise, although both might be acknowledged by their CoP. Hence, their teaching expertise becomes a source of authority relatively later in their career.

The recruitment process is key at this point. Most informants claimed to have received job offers because of their vocational profile. Therefore, entry requirement to the vocational teacher community was based on the vocational and not the teaching competence. This influences the vocational teachers' regime of competence, setting occupational competence and experience as the basis of the regime, leaving teaching competence to a different place. This part of the regime is shaped as such based on actual recruitment processes suggesting the pervasive influence of the employing institution (Wenger, 1998). In addition, vocational competence might consolidate easier in the regime of competence also due to the long exposure of vocational teachers to the labour market logic, including the principle of causality, ideas internalised during their years as occupational experts.

Moving from the labour market to education, vocational, teachers transition between a logic of effectiveness and profit, to a logic of individual wholesome development, expected to be combined with professional development. This transition can lead to a tension between

the vocational and the teacher identity (Tyler & Dymock, 2021). Nevertheless, teachers in this study prioritised interpersonal competence (see also Antera et al., 2022), and more specifically the ability to create a student-teacher connection, over vocational expertise. This discrepancy can be explained by the principals' role in the recruitment process, whose focus on vocational competence as the main requirement of employment gives prominences to the vocational identity of teachers, undermining the transition to a teacher identity. Principals, being members in other communities as well, have mostly peripheral membership in the community of the vocational teaching practice. Although the two communities might overlap, an agreement in the respective regimes should not be taken for granted. In the effort to align different regimes of competence, tensions might arise. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the regime is shaped and legitimised by external factors too, as the CoP exists in a broader landscape of practices and communities. Hence, the regime is refined by the interaction between the individual and the community, but also between the community and the landscape, with its negotiation occurring in different levels.

The development of teaching related competence and their subconscious use in teaching requires more attention. In an international comparative study, Canrinus et al. (2019) compared vocational with other teachers, suggesting that the latter may have opportunities to try out their future profession before starting working as teachers, while vocational teachers start teaching with limited teaching experience (Aamodt et al., 2016). Opposed to these findings, the present study suggests that vocational teachers have experience of relevance to teaching and thus some level of competence, developed in different settings, usually informal. Often, they are not fully conscious of the learning potential of these experiences, and hence, they remain unexploited.

With established vocational identity and competence, vocational teachers can act like brokers between communities, both in Sweden and in other countries (Canrinus et al., 2019; Sauli, 2021). According to Wenger (1998), one should belong to the occupational community and at the same time maintain distance from it, implying some form of multi-membership. This work demands boundary-crossing (Berner, 2010; Tanggaard, 2007), but also *boundary extension* (Mårtensson et al., 2019), suggesting that school norms are extended and applied in the workplace. The present study contributes to national and international VET research by showing that vocational teachers enrich the regime of competence not only with vocational knowledge and skills, but also with previous teaching competence, developed often in informal settings, like extracurricular activities. In that sense, they cross the boundaries between informal and workplace learning, highlighting that competence regime is not a standard, but a negotiated concept encompassing learning within formal, non-formal and informal spheres.

6   Conclusion

Overall, approaching important competence through the regime of competence concept has underlined the dynamic and transformative nature of competence and regime of competence, a characteristic that should be considered when studying competence development in communities. With the regime being influenced by several actors, a need to better define membership, especially in levels of peripheral participation or membership in overlapping communities, is stressed. Moreover, since the CoP theory focuses on the community and its members, it is crucial to note that the attention is distracted from the role of social structures, like regulations and recruitment strategies, which also are determinant in shaping the regime of competence.

In closing, considering that parts of teaching competence seem to derive from previous learning experiences, investigating the enactment of previous competence is critical. Formally valued competence, like occupation qualifications and experience seem to receive higher value due to the legitimacy the system attributes to them. Teaching competence on the other hand, as competence required by the job, receive value due to their relevance for the practice. The lack of alignment between the formal and the actually required not only sets a dilemma over prioritisation to teachers, but also entails the risk of misinterpreting the joint enterprise of the practice of vocational teaching. With reference to learning this might lead to one sided competence development, which does not support the multifaceted work demands of vocational teachers.

The development of competence shared between the vocational and the teaching practice in informal activities is of interest for further research. The subconscious everyday teaching activity performed in various settings can be the starting point of reflection for future vocational teachers. Indeed, the realisation of presuppositions on teaching should be explored in the earlier stages of developing a teacher identity with aim to support smooth professionalisation.

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