Discovering and developing the vocational teacher identity

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the role of previous occupational identity in the formation of the (new) teacher identity of vocational teachers. The focus is on how vocational teachers discover their teaching identity, how they describe the connection between their previous occupation and teacher identity and how they describe a competent member of the teaching community.

Design/methodology/approach – The theoretical approach is inspired by Communities of Practice (CoP) theory. More specifically, the realignment between socially demanded competence in the profession and personal experience as well as identification with the teaching community are discussed. The research material comes from 14 interviews with vocational teachers in different disciplines.

Findings – Findings indicate first that the process of professional identity (trans)formation was initiated by *finding one's teaching self* when the individuals became aware of their interest in teaching by discovering that they had already achieved some sort of teaching-related competence. Second, individuals had been *connecting their professional identities* – finding common competence between their previous occupation and the teaching role. Third, vocational teachers experienced *legitimising their competence and their new identity* with reference to what their new CoP instructed as important competence (regime of competence).

Originality/value – While teachers' vocational competence is not scrutinised, their teaching competence needs to be constantly proved. This imbalance often leads to teachers returning to an aspect of their identity that is well established – their vocational competence. Looking back to their occupational competences constitutes a realignment backwards, when teachers attempt to serve their new professional goal by drawing on old competence.

Keywords Vocational teachers, Professional identity, Communities of practice, VET in Sweden, Teaching competence, Vocational competence, Thematic analysis

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Professional activity occupies considerable space in everyday life; it is part of us, of who we are and how we experience the world. Professional identities are, therefore, of vital importance and their development, construction, or transformation affects our growth as individuals. Professional identities are heavily based on individual history and experience; nevertheless, they are also influenced and thus negotiated within specific social conditions imposed by the individual's current work and the broader society. In addition to social conditions, identity is negotiated in relation to colleagues and students – other individuals within the workplace who have different needs and aspirations (Farnsworth and Higham, 2012; Köpsen, 2014).

As Fejes and Köpsén (2014) state, vocational teachers shape their teacher identities through boundary crossing between their previous occupations, their teacher training and their work as teachers. The challenge in this process is the balancing of teacher and occupational identities. The transition from one work and, thus, one identity to another can include tension (Beijaard *et al.*, 2004). For instance, Pillen *et al.* (2013) identified this tension in

novice teachers wanting to invest time in teaching, while feeling pressure from other tasks (also in Orr and Simmons, 2010). Tensions and negotiations have also been observed for experienced teachers, since professional identity is not seen as ever finalised within one's career (e.g. Akkerman and Meijer, 2011). Instead, it is an ongoing negotiation between the individual and the social surroundings (Beijaard *et al.*, 2004; Vähäsantanen, 2015).

Tensions can be imbued with confrontation between professional interests and change, bringing to vocational teachers a variety of dilemmas and the feeling of ambivalence (Lippke, 2012). This confrontation may end up in a positive way, when the existing professional identity happens to agree with the new work practice, resulting in teachers embracing their new situation and most importantly their new socially expected identity. In other words, identities may be challenged by the change of the job or any other transition (Day and Kington, 2008), but at the same time they can also be empowered to grow and reshape.

The profession of vocational teaching as well as transitions associated with it varies globally with respect to formal conditions, e.g. qualifications or recruitment, but also content and form (Grollmann, 2008). Sweden's demand for vocational teachers, especially in some disciplines, has loosened the teaching requirements for vocational teacher candidates, opening opportunities for individuals with vocational backgrounds. Moreover, in addition to the requirement of a teacher certificate, up-to-date vocational knowledge and a connection to the world of work is demanded of vocational teachers. In other words, dual identity is a formal requirement.

At the same time, academic research shows limited support for maintaining occupational competence (Antera, 2023; Fejes and Köpsén, 2014), while the status of teacher training in the profession also seems to be underestimated, with 43,2% of vocational teachers in upper secondary (NAE, 2021a) and 35,5% (NAE, 2021b) in adult education lacking teacher training. In this context, the current study examines how individual teachers navigate and negotiate with the social when crossing boundaries between school and work. The aim is to explore how vocational teachers describe the development of their vocational teacher identity in the teaching community in Sweden. More specifically:

(1) How do vocational teachers discover their teacher identity?

(2) How do they describe the connection between their occupational and teaching identities?

(3) How do they describe being a competent member of the teaching community?

Vocational teacher identity and competence in previous research

The career transition from occupational worker to vocational teacher, focusing on negotiating and aligning the two respective identities has been much researched (e.g. Köpsén, 2014; Farnsworth and Higham, 2012; Green, 2014). This transition occurs not only between two professions, but also between two different worlds of logic – the world of work dominated by the logic of production and effectiveness, and the world of school characterised by a focus on learning and processes (Moodie and Wheelahan, 2012; Sarastuen, 2019).

Vocational teacher training candidates are often already-established, competent vocational workers, who also have an established vocational identity (Antera, 2022; Green, 2014; Viskovic and Robson, 2001). In Sweden, this is because occupational experience is a requirement for teacher training (NAE, 2020). According to Sarastuen (2020), the role transition from occupational worker to teacher is a change of position in society that draws the attention to the processes occurring between the old and the new position. The two professional positions represent two different contexts, which respectively instruct ways of being and ways of acting. For the current study, these contexts are approached through their respective communities of practice (the previous occupation and the teaching community).

Where the teachers come from offers a valuable perspective for exploring where they are heading to in their transition to teaching. This transition is affected by the alignment between the craft (or "where they have been") and the teaching (or "where they are going") (Sarastuen, 2020).

Labour market and education are two distinctly different worlds. The world of work often requires a highly skilled vocational workforce, but it also includes a high degree of autonomy, physicality and specific norms and values. Education, on the other hand, is known to be characterised by a focus on processes, with inclusion, diversity and bureaucracy being central features (Page, 2013; Colley *et al.*, 2003). Based on these differences, different ways of being are to be expected. The identity of a worker is seen as embodied, including specific dispositions established and legitimised in the vocational culture (Colley *et al.*, 2003). For migrant workers re-entering their vocation in the new environment is even more challenging and it may pose threats to their social and professional identity (Eliasson *et al.*, 2022).

Vocational teachers have been described as experienced individuals educating others in practices that they themselves esteem (Robson *et al.*, 2004), while teaching students how to behave in a workplace is among the main responsibilities of the vocational teacher identity (Köpsén, 2014). Nevertheless, the transition to the new teaching profession does not necessarily imply isolation from the previous. Page (2013) suggested that previous professional identities continue to influence vocational teachers due to the strong allegiances with the former vocation (also in Green, 2014; Robson *et al.*, 2004), whereas Avis and Bathmaker (2006) claimed that teachers' earlier work experiences served as resources to evaluate the experiences within the teaching practice. Distancing themselves from the previous community might challenge vocational teachers since their credibility is often closely related to their industry experience (Antera, 2022; Viskovic and Robson, 2001).

The teacher training experience holds a key role in the transition from the previous occupation to teaching. Research has discussed the supportive role of teacher training for further education (or second career) teachers not only in relationship to the identity formation, but also to the way the continuous professional development is shaped (Husband, 2015, 2018). Furthermore, in Sweden statistically significant differences in how competent vocational teachers perceive themselves have been found when comparing qualified and non-qualified teachers (Antera, 2023). Additional research highlighted the transformation that trainee teachers undergo as well as the tensions they experience either as trainee teachers or as novices. An interesting point among these studies is that the grow of confidence that trainees show over time should not necessarily be correlated with a more diverse teaching practice (Dixon *et al.*, 2010) as teachers often learn to cope instead of learn to teach (Orr, 2010).

According to Orr and Simmons (2010), a teacher identity is not limited in teaching; it connects to status and salary. Hence, vocational teacher identity is formed by the interaction between individual dispositions and experiences and the surrounding environment. Hence, exploring the struggle of negotiating and aligning competence as an aspect of the occupational worker and the teacher identity with the aim of better understanding the successful formation of vocational teacher identities is seen as vital (Green, 2014).

Conceptual framework: learning as the formation of identity

Approaching the person holistically, not only as a cognitive entity but also as a person with feelings and relationships to others, the focus is on the person as a social participant, and the social world is seen as the resource for building their identity through negotiating meaning making. This study's conceptual starting point is Wenger's (1998) work on Communities of Practice (CoP) and identity formation through participation in a CoP. Learning is beyond merely acquiring skills; it is becoming a competent and validated professional in a CoP. Participants have their own experience and, thus, understanding of practice, which might

reflect the regime of competence, a set of principles, and expectations that recognise membership (Wenger, 1998) or not. In this case, learning is a realignment of the newcomer's prior competence with the competence of the new CoP, with prior competence and the new community's competence pulling each other along and resulting both in the newcomer reflecting the new community's competence and recent member adding a new element to the practice. This new element is to be negotiated by the community that will either embrace or reject the contribution (Wenger, 1998).

Vocational teachers, when entering the practice of a school, bring a set of ideas about teaching that can vary as vastly their background does. The realignment between socially demanded competence in the profession and personal experience is a process of learning and each moment of it constitutes a claim to competence that might be embraced by the community or not. This realignment resembles what Christiansen (1999) discusses as conformity, the alignment of behaviours with what is socially anticipated to enhance identity and avoid the risk of social disapproval. The effort to pursue and thus achieve socially demanded competence entails setting a new goal, which is expected to guide and inform action. Goals that individuals select and are committed to, are effective, as they are self-relevant and self-defining, hence meaningful for one's identity. The achievement of these socially demanded and individually embraced competence goals are the assertion of an individual identity which is socially approved.

Identification with the community involves a kind of modification when the member becomes accountable to the regime of the CoP's competence. With this identification and modification process, the relationship of the individual to the practice and the community becomes part of their identity (Wenger, 1998). In other words, identity reflects the complicated relationship and interplay between the social and the personal definition of learning as social becoming. Social becoming also addresses defining one's self in relationship to the group and what the group instructs. This second aspect is what makes it a process of identity formation.

Identity is a negotiated experience within a community, or in Wenger's (1998) words, "we define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation" (p. 145). The learning trajectory of where we were to where we are now strengthens and affirms the identity. In the example of vocational teachers, participation in CoPs often translates to dealing with "difficult students", usually referring to students with low motivation and engagement (Antera, 2022). When successful, this enquiry increases legitimation, boosting professional identity and supporting the engagement of greater challenges and assumption of greater responsibilities.

The concept of identity is key in CoP theory. Focusing on identity, the tension between competence and experience becomes more obvious. More specifically, when experience is reflected on and becomes conscious competence, or when experience becomes acknowledged by the environment and thus takes the form of (formal) legitimate competence, then identity is reinforced. Hence, identity reflects these transformation processes from experience to competence, as well as the tensions involved. Moreover, the focus on identity demonstrates the human dimension embedded in practice, stressing that the knowledge and the knower are not distinguished from each other, and hence practice enables becoming (Wenger, 1998). Collegial relationships, for example, are part of the practice while they simultaneously constitute competence in development. Gaining competence means becoming that individual for whom having that competence is a meaningful way of being in the world. In this study, we perceive vocational teachers' professional identity as an on-going developmental process of navigation and negotiation between the personal experience and the social context, as both a worker and a teacher.

Study context and methods
In Sweden, vocational education and training (VET) is offered at upper- and post-secondary level, in adult education and in folk high schools in 12 different programmes. Schools offer general and/or different vocational programmes of their choice. VET can be school-based or apprenticeship education. The proportion of workplace-based learning differs with a minimum of 50% for apprenticeships and 15-week work-based learning for school-based VET (Skolverket ReferNET Sweden, 2019). Although vocational teacher certification became obligatory for employment in 2010 (Swedish Parliament), a teacher shortage led to the exemption of vocational teachers from this requirement.

This study follows a qualitative approach. The material was collected from semi-structured interviews with 14 vocational teachers, conducted on Zoom [1] between May and October 2021. Each interview lasted on average 60 minutes and was video/audio recorded [2] and then transcribed. Interviewees' personal data have been managed according to Stockholm University regulations (2020).

Informants
The informants represent different vocational disciplines in upper-secondary school (Gymnasium) and adult education (Komvux). Potential interviewees were recruited from school websites and a list of vocational teachers collaborating with Stockholm University. This was thus a convenience sample. As shown in Table 1, eight women and six men were interviewed from the following sectors: hotel and tourism, health and social care, food, handicraft, children and recreation, as well from business – administration. Most of them had received formal teacher training.

Teachers' ages ranged between 30 and 59, and teaching experience between two and 22 years. They had worked in their previous occupation from between seven and 28 years. Eight teachers worked in upper secondary schools (including a Special Education school) and the rest in adult education.

Analysis
First, the researcher became familiar with the material (Braun and Clarke, 2006), transcribed the interviews verbatim, and coded the text under the predefined interview axes. These included career path to teaching, current duties, important and achieved competence, work challenges, school life environment, and lifelong learning.

Second, the researcher generated initial codes through line-by-line coding. This first code set was applied to all transcripts. A second coding round was performed to ensure consistent coding (Saldaña, 2009), resulting in the addition of new codes and the revision of older ones.

Third, themes or recurring patterns capturing something interesting in the data (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017) were created based on codes, with the latter often being associated with more than one theme.

Fourth, the researcher reviewed and modified the themes and subthemes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) before fifth, the final themes and subthemes were explored, focusing on the relationships among them, resulting in a thematic map, as presented in Figure 1.

The themes' proximity in the text was investigated in an effort to understand the connections between the different themes.

Regarding limitations, first, interviews were done in English, which was a second language for the interviewees. However, they could use also Swedish words or phrases [3] when they considered it more comfortable. The language barrier possibly led to bigger effort to provide clarification, with the interviewees giving examples with their responses. Second, most of the interviewees had completed or were undergoing vocational teacher training. This

Vocational programme	Pseudonym	Vocational teacher training	Occupational experience	Teaching experience	School type
Restaurant management and food	David	Yes	More than 10 years	More than 10 years	Adult education centre (AEC)
	Lucas	Yes	More than 10 years	0–5 years	AEC
	Niklas	Yes	More than 10 years	6–10 years	Special education high school
	Tobias	Yes	More than 10 years	More than 10	High school
Health and social care	Anna	Yes	6–10 years	6–10 years	High school
	Maria	Currently	6–10 years	0–5 years	High school
	Per	No	More than 10 years	0–5 years	High school
	Camilla	Yes	More than 10 years	0–5 years	AEC
	Sara	Currently	10 years	0–5 years	AEC
Child and recreation	Katarina	Yes	More than 10 years	More than 10	AEC
Hotel and tourism	Laura	Yes	More than 10 years	6–10 years	High school
Business and administration	Karin	Yes	6–10 years	6–10 years	High school
Dance (handicraft programme)	Adam	Yes	More than 10 years	6–10 years	High school
Hair and makeup (handicraft programme)	Malin	Yes	More than 10 years	More than 10 years	High school

Source(s): Authors' own work

is an indication of a potentially positive stance to education and any other type of professional development.

Ethical considerations
Participation in the study was voluntary. The informants received the study information and gave their consent prior to the interviews. Personal details are protected with pseudonyms. All informant information has been stored according to the Stockholm University General Data Protection Regulation (Stockholm University, 2020).

Findings
In this section, the findings of the study are presented. Starting from the moment that made teachers realise their teaching interest, the competence transfer between the previous occupation and teaching is presented, followed by their views on freedom and autonomy. Therefore, three phases are discussed in the findings:

(1) Exploring and discovering the "teaching self";

(2) connecting identities; and

(3) legitimising identity (the new legitimised identity).
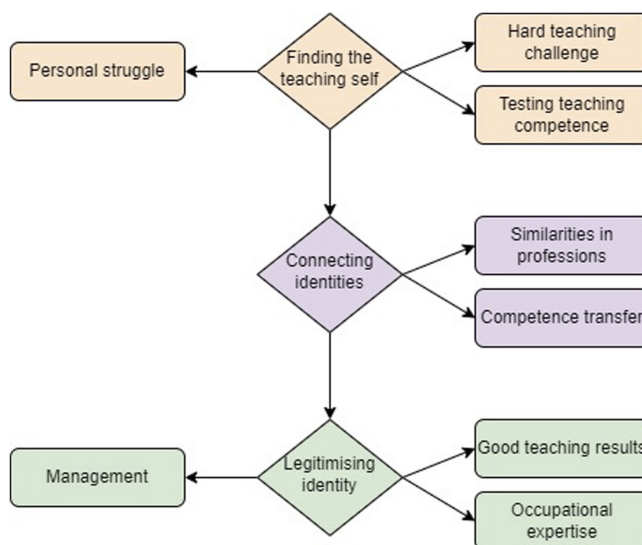
Exploring and discovering the "teaching self"
Interviewees narrated life incidents that helped them discover their interest in teaching, but
also incidents that affected the way their teacher identity had developed. These moments
were often located early in their teaching careers and in their personal lives, showing that
teaching and learning are parts of our lives performed either consciously in a professional
setting, or subconsciously through everyday activities.

Two main categories of the crucial incidents in teachers' lives related to their professional
identities are distinct. The first category (Lucas, Anna, Sara, Adam, Malin) refers to a
situation when teachers had the opportunity to explore and develop their teaching
competence. Either through organising study circles, or by teaching in their respective
recreational activities, or even by participating in other classes, informants had the
opportunity to discover a side of themselves that favoured teaching as an activity. This
discovery was accompanied by a feeling of excitement and the need to further explore and
practise this "new" competence.

> Yeah. Actually, I have practised taekwondo all my life. So, I've been a taekwondo trainer also for a
> couple of years, pretty much, I had students about five hours a week or more. So that's, that's ground
> to stand on for the teaching part, too, yes, I think. (Lucas)

The second category refers to a challenging situation that informants had experienced
(Laura, David, Camilla, Malin). This situation was described as teaching what were
considered "hard" classes, where students had several issues (low engagement, lack of
interest, violence, etc.). Successfully teaching these students was a boost for teachers'
confidence. Achieving where others had failed, according to teachers, gave them a feeling of
competence and the confidence to further pursue this new career opportunity.

> When I was a beginner as a teacher, I had a class that was very difficult. I didn't know. So, and a few
> teachers had actually left the school because of this group. And nobody told me, and I thought they
> were okay. And I was told this afterwards, when the whole semester was over, and they all got their

grades. And everyone said, "wow, did you really face that group?" And that made me confident at once. I thought all right. I can face them, so that made me sure that, okay, I can be a teacher. (Camilla)

In this category, there is a subgroup of teachers (Maria, Karin, Adam) who referred to personal rather than professional struggles. Personal struggles included accidents and health issues that prohibited informants from continuing with their previous work and led them to search for other options.

In all cases, the incentive for teachers was success, the success of achieving goals set, the success of delivering to their students or mentees. Another common element was the toughness of the situation. Corresponding to what was considered difficult by others and developing a close relationship with "difficult" students offered the teachers the sense of acceptance and recognition, both by the students and the other teachers. In some cases, school principals formally expressed this with a job offer. The main similarity between the categories lies in the confirmation of sufficient competence to perform the vocational teaching job.

Connecting identities

Summarising the reasons for informants leaving their previous occupations, mental or health problems, accidents, and high stress levels as well as an intense need to develop themselves further were raised. With a decrease in job satisfaction in their previous profession, they gradually started thinking about a career change which led to teaching. The teachers in this study said that while they still enjoyed their previous occupation, they did not feel safe or complete in it. All teachers clearly reported an interest in their previous occupations.

Vocational teachers maintained that their teacher identity was more present to them than their occupational identity. The exception was Lucas, who, because he was a new teacher (with only two years' experience), fell on the borderline between the two professions. Moreover, their appreciation for and importance of the previous occupation became obvious, with teachers continuing to work in these occupations, or expressing the desire to have further training and remaining updated on new trends, which showcased a dual membership and active participation. Even more intensely continuing their connection to a previous professional identity were nurses, who continued to work part time as nurses (although this was partly due to the pandemic situation). This is an indication that they felt commitment towards society not only as teachers, but also as nurses. Nursing teachers often described their contribution to their previous occupation in the context of teaching, stressing that they were preparing future nursing staff. Commitment to previous occupation has been described by many informants and it can be related to their long occupational experience. The following quote highlights Camilla's commitment to nursing.

I work full time as a teacher so I nurse only some weekends, and now in the, you know, in the summer and during time off.

I think I have to do my part in the pandemic, I just have to. (Camilla)

Although there was still a lively link to their previous occupation, it was clear that informants identified more as teachers and were happy with their choice. In this study, many teachers pointed out that the two identities seemed to coexist and be practised interchangeably, especially for those who had been teachers for several years.

With reference to connecting identities, many teachers recognised the overlapping points between the vocational teacher's regime of competence and that of an occupational practitioner. They identified commonalities between the two jobs which assisted a smoother transition, at least in terms of competence. Chef teachers mentioned that leading and teaching their staff were competences that they had used both before and after becoming vocational

teachers. Leadership skills had been useful in classroom management, while the planning of a professional kitchen and the planning of the classroom kitchen seemed to occur in the same way.

In addition, Laura had transferred the Human Resources skills involved in "reading and understanding a person" to a tool for getting to know students and matching them with their internship institutions. In all cases, the teachers seemed to first recognise tasks that were common to both jobs and then identify the competence needed for these tasks, focusing on the relevance of the competence for the practice.

Vocational teachers with a nursing background found several commonalities between the two professions, making the transfer of competence quite easy. For Anna, the goals of a nurse and a teacher are similar – assist patients and students respectively to become independent by providing support, but also allowing space for initiative. For Sara, working in an ambulance resembled her classroom work, as she had to make the final decisions, but also had to listen to what the students or the patients had to say and use it as guidance. Of course, the teacher job seemed to be "softer" because more of her support was required.

Maria mentioned that both identities were necessary because without the nurse she could not be a teacher and vice versa. She claimed that teaching had improved her nursing, since she was more patient and better at managing colleagues, whereas nursing had improved her teaching, as she knew the subjects she taught very well. Karin, who worked with students that faced social issues, had various diagnoses, and often low grades had quite a different view. She claimed that while she should remain updated, she did not need to be able to do her previous occupation *per se*; what was important was being able to teach it. In other words, her role as a teacher in the development of students and their emancipation was much more crucial and central. In the same line of thought, Niklas, who described the students at this school as with low motivation stated:

> . . . my centre is about trying to help the students evolve 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. (Niklas)

All in all, teachers identified various competences that they had transferred and re-contextualised from their previous occupations to teaching. The need to adapt to the new demands led them to turn to what was already known and familiar. Most competence transfer referred to interpersonal and communication competences, with leadership relating to classroom management, supporting patients relating to student guidance, and dealing with customers relating to understanding the students' needs.

The new legitimised identity: freedom and autonomy
Teachers in this study seemed to enjoy a lot of freedom in their teaching jobs, especially compared to their previous occupations. Occupations within the health and food sector were described as stressful and with demanding schedules, making the job of a teacher seem flexible, allowing space for decision-making and creativity. Freedom for teachers refers to the fact that they could make changes to their working schedule, they could decide on how to run their classes and often had full responsibility over designing several aspects of the vocational programme. Although this flexibility is innate to the teaching profession in Sweden, the vocational teachers in this study often considered it to be granted them due to their occupational expertise. Per, employed in a school with several vocational programmes, said:

> That's because I think we have our experience, skills, background skills and education. So, I think, at the same time, it's very hard for the principal to come in and say: 'No, you should do that', because they have no, they haven't the same background. And it doesn't only apply to us, it's the same with

(car) mechanics. Principals can't go to the mechanics and say, you know, 'you cannot do that', because they don't know.

Others, including other teachers, students, principals and parents, cannot judge occupational expertise and must, therefore, trust the vocational teacher. This expertise grants freedom and, thus, permits changes to be made that will improve the overall quality of education. This feeling (of freedom) strengthens teachers' agency as well. Teaching competence, on the other hand, being more integrated into everyday activities, can be judged by all the actors mentioned above, thus leading to teachers' competence and performance being scrutinised.

In some cases, the recognition of the occupational expertise happens at recruitment. Then, freedom and autonomy are granted early and teachers enjoy relatively high agency. Malin talked about her first job in VET:

> And then 2010, someone asked me to, to come to, outside X (big Swedish city) and help them develop the handelsprogrammet, the handicraft programme, with the focus on hair and makeup . . . hair and makeup . . . what do we even call it? Hair and makeup stylist. Yep. And I thought, hmm, I don't know. Anyway, I, that happened. So, I went there.

On the other hand, acknowledging a teacher's teaching expertise depends on teachers producing good school results – good grades and satisfied parents and students.

Nearly all teachers attributed their freedom and autonomy to the trust placed in them by their principals, the fact that their students achieved good grades, and that they maintained good working relationships with their respective industries. In other words, trust comes as a result of good performance and that leads to more freedom and autonomy. Nevertheless, it is important to state that occupational competence supports and enables the recognition of the teaching competence.

There are, however, teachers who experienced limited freedom due to a lack of support from the school management. Most often, these teachers just found ways of doing what they thought was best, while keeping the management team satisfied. They found alternatives that did not cross any regulation boundaries while still serving their teaching goals. Teachers reported that management was often unaware of actual occupational life and so had a poor perception of what VET should be. Laura currently working in a high school that offers only one vocational programme, mentioned:

> I think the most important thing is that they (management team) lack knowledge about vocational programmes. And it's, it has become more and more obvious. I mean, they, the principal here is not . . . he, he, for him, it's like a bag of money. (Laura)

According to informants, the various priorities often set by management can make it challenging for management representatives to decide what is best for the vocational students. In this sense, principals are often seen as non-members of the vocational teachers' CoP and, thus, their opinion is not equally appreciated. These cases are indicative of teachers demanding further legitimacy and recognition, not only within the vocational teacher community, but also within the broader school community. The way teachers are recruited gives them the feeling that they are necessary, which is often the case, given the high demand for teachers. This raises their self-confidence and when their competence is not trusted, a conflict is created.

In all cases, it was clear that recognition originates largely in factors and actors external to the teacher and their CoP. Acceptance, recognition of competence and, hence, trust and freedom come from the students and the management and are mostly based on performance and learning results. This strengthens and validates teachers' professional identity as a competent member of the school community. Interestingly, this experience seems to contradict their respective experiences in their previous vocations, where although clients/patients had a say, their expertise was not dependent on clients' judgement. Also, in their

previous vocations, it was often the case that their boss was someone with a similar occupational profile and, thus, a legitimate member of the CoP.

Discussion

Discovering and developing a vocational teacher identity occurred in three phases. The process of professional identity (trans)formation started with *finding one's teaching self*; second, through *connecting identities*; and third, *becoming competent by validating the new identity*. The phases of discovering and developing a vocational teacher identity are presented in Figure 2. This study also explored the connection between vocational teachers' competence and identity formation when moving between jobs and crossing the respective boundaries.

Finding one's teaching self seemed to happen while teachers had a peripheral or even transactional participation in a community of teaching practice (Wenger, 1998) and had the status of teacher in training and student, respectively. In this position, they had the opportunity to test both their interest in and ability for teaching tasks, which were sometimes loosely defined. Teachers with an innate interest in teaching expressed outside of the formal education setting, and especially before they considered becoming teachers, showed stronger commitment. Individuals who were assigned a teaching role by chance seemed to have had enough time to reflect on this role; hence, when the opportunity arose, it appeared they turned their teaching interest into a job (also reported for teachers in Coppe *et al.*, 2021). This offered a pool of experiences that prepared them, showing teachers themselves their own level of interest and commitment, and building strong motivation for being part of the teaching profession and community. Overall, this is a phase of exploring one's values and ideas about teaching and learning, while also becoming aware of one's own competence. In this phase, ideas about the function and role of education are turned into a goal-directed activity (occupation). Setting the role of education as a goal to achieve makes the occupation of teacher
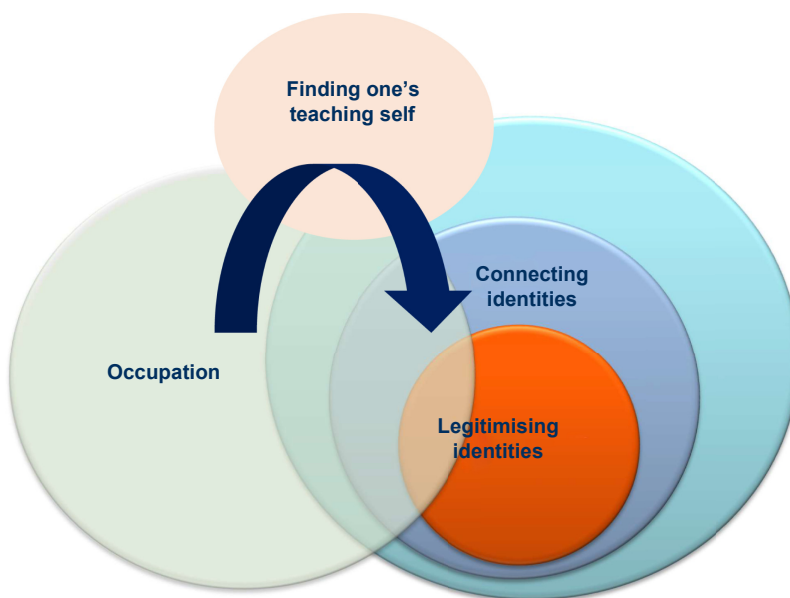
Figure 2.
Phases of discovering and developing a vocational teacher identity

Source(s): Authors' own work

part of their individual identity, and achieving competence in it, part of fulfilling this identity. This is the beginning of a process of realignment with reference to both competence and identity.

Moving from peripheral to more active participation forms (in Wenger's [1998] words), teachers' teaching competence needs to be constantly proved – to their students, to their principals and maybe even to parents. On the contrary, their vocational competence is taken for granted, and is not scrutinised or judged. Although their membership of the teaching community is not fragile, this constant doubt could be an additional reason why teachers return to an aspect of their identity that is more solid and less questioned – their vocational competence. This can be seen when teachers try to reason about their choices as teachers based on experiences from their occupational life. Looking back to their occupational competences/experience goes against the previous phase of realignment, because this constitutes a realignment backwards – teachers attempt to serve their new professional goal by drawing on old competence. Such an approach is indicative of isolation, as turning to the school community for identity solidification is not discussed by the informants of this study. An alternative approach would be what Avis and Bathmaker's (2006) study suggested, that transitioning from novices, or more specifically trainees, to confident and competent teachers can be supported by induction processes, by access to education programmes and to mentors, and by structured integrated support provided in school.

On the other hand, teachers might try to solidify their teaching competence and acknowledge their teaching expertise by referring to their formal teacher training, when they have completed it. By referring to pedagogical theories, teachers can support their choices when discussing with other teachers or principals. In both cases, vocational teachers are trying to prove their actual competence by referring to some formal, already legitimised competence that is recognised by others. Hence, both competence and identity are shaped and reshaped, not only with reference to the individual, but always in relationship to others. In this way, vocational teachers search to bridge their occupational and teaching professions, as well as their formal legitimised competence with the competence required by the teaching job.

The integrated identity

Vocational teachers expressing multiple identities is common in the literature. While each individual chooses to focus on one or the other identity (Nylund and Gudmundson, 2017), the overall professional identity of a vocational teacher always encompasses parts of the previous occupation – most importantly, vocational knowledge and attitudes. Indeed, as highlighted by previous research (e.g. Avis and Bathmaker, 2006), much of the competence required by the previous occupations had not been lost but rather introduced into the new teaching job. These included interpersonal competence (Antera, 2022; Antera *et al.*, 2022), leadership, and flexibility. These competencies, which can have a more generic nature, acquire a new meaning when applied in the teaching practice. The fact that competencies assume a specific meaning when they are applied highlights the role of the CoP and the situatedness of competence (Antera, 2021).

Concerning the relationship between the teacher and their occupational identity, this study highlights how teachers tend to turn to the latter when shaping the former. Since the occupational identity is well established, legitimised in the respective community and internalised by the individual, it comes as no surprise that vocational teachers seek refuge in and support from what is known and what feels secure. Vocational teachers return to their occupational identities to look for tasks and competences that match the work demands of vocational teaching, not only to accelerate their competence development, but also to make

meaning of their new role. This seems to occur in the phase of connecting identities, as reported in the study.

Besides meaning making and competence development, vocational teachers tend to turn to their occupational identities also when dealing with issues of legitimacy in the teaching community. More specifically, the unacknowledged teaching competence and the non-legitimised teacher identity (a feature especially of the first years of vocational teachers' employment) trigger constant returns to the occupational identity, for purposes of demonstrating expertise and lobbying for greater independence in decision making.

With the occupational identity offering a feeling of security and a point of reference to compare and shape their new professional self, it is indisputable that understanding who one is as an occupational worker is core to the development of the teacher identity. While previous experience and multiple identities are important for all individuals, this element is particularly intense for vocational teachers (Avis and Bathmaker, 2006), because of their previous work activity, its duration, and their interest in it. All informants stressed their innate and continuous interest in their previous occupations, which is demonstrated by their investing their free time in them. Whereas the interest in the occupation does not diminish their teaching interest, it reinforces the importance and the continuous presence of the occupational identity.

Both identities seem to undergo transformation. Due to the distancing from the occupational practice and community, the occupational identity is often redefined. This transformed occupational identity centres around the preparation of new workers for the occupational community. The teachers see themselves as bridges for the newcomers (their students) to the occupational community. At the same time, they equip the community with new skilled members, contributing to the community's joint enterprise. In this way they actualise their personal commitment to the previous occupation.

Regarding the vocational teacher identity, this seems to develop based on the occupational identity and on previous experiences of and about teaching. Before the full formation of the teacher identity, the occupational identity acts as the basis for the individual professional identity at least in the first years. Therefore, understanding the occupational identity deeply and holistically and the values deriving from it is key to assisting identity transformation and a smooth transition to teaching.

The acknowledgement of vocational and teaching competence can be a challenge for the teacher's identity. First, both competences are common to the same individual and are relevant to the same job. Second, their asynchronous acknowledgement might further support the sense of having two distinct identities rather than an integrated one. This can be seen when new teachers identify more with their previous occupation than as either teachers or both. Nevertheless, the vocational teacher identity encompasses multiple elements of the occupational identity, not only in relation to the content and skills required for vocational teaching, but also to more subtle aspects, like ideas about ethics, purpose of life or purpose of education. Hence, the vocational teachers seem to develop not a double, but an integrated identity that encapsulates their occupational identity and all the transformations it undergoes on the path to the teacher identity. The two identities not only coincide and coexist but they are one.

Conclusions

From realising their motivation to teach, to transferring competence to the teaching practice and legitimising these competence, vocational teachers shape their teaching identity through negotiating with the respective CoP and the competence regime it instructs. "Membership translates into an identity as a form of competence" (Wenger, 1998, p. 153).

The Swedish case of vocational teachers presents a CoP with its competence regime influenced by non-members – the school principals. This can limit the autonomy of the practitioners, while affecting the identities of new and older members alike. Hence, there is a need for teaching standards that can guide teachers' recruitment and in-service training. Moreover, pedagogical education for school principals could help bridge the gap between these actors and the teaching community.

Creating connections between working life and education seems to be a key competence of vocational teachers (Tapani and Salonen, 2019). Educating teachers to recognise and create these connections can support smoother vocational teacher professionalisation and better education and labour market correspondence. Moreover, teaching competence transfer occurs subconsciously in teachers' transition to the teaching profession. This process, however, is bidirectional; teachers constantly cross boundaries using competence developed in other settings (Antera, 2022). This process can also be reinforced by in-service training focusing on transfer and transformation, starting with the individual's own dispositions rather than the general pedagogical training offered to general and vocational teachers. General teachers transition from higher education to schools; vocational teachers come from the world of production. The conditions for them are different; hence, different support is required to facilitate their transition.

Moreover, teacher training value could be reinforced with part of the school budget allocated for formal teacher training and activities strengthening occupational competence. The occupational part of vocational teachers' identity is crucial. This should be reflected not only as their duty, but also as their fully supported right.

Considering future research, the connection of vocational teachers to the industry as well as to the teaching community should be explored. Vocational teachers start their career in the industry or the labour market, a fact that influences the way they view VET and its purpose, as well as the way they tend to develop their own competence. Hence, researching on the coping strategies that vocational teachers tend to introduce from their previous occupations would be not only informative but also revealing ways to potentially enrich educational practices. In addition, it has been shown that vocational teachers are affected by their work environment and the respective community, meaning the school and the other teachers in it. Future research should explore the relationship between general and vocational teachers as well as the differences between the establishment and legitimisation of their respective teacher identities. Such research could contribute on better collaboration in the school community and possibly on smoother professionalisation of vocational teachers. Finally, as this study has not extensively discussed the role of teacher training, it would be interesting to investigate the reasons why teachers do not pursuit teacher training, especially with a focus on teachers in technical programmes, that report lower numbers of teacher certification.

Notes

1. Except Interview 5 (in person).

2. The audio file from Interview 5 was partly destroyed (20 min audio and the researcher's notes). Also, interview with Maria was in Greek. The quotes presented have been translated by the author.

3. The interview with Maria was in Greek. The quotes presented have been translated by the author.

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