Vocational students’ experiences of power relations during periods of workplace learning – a means for citizenship learning

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ABSTRACT
Students in vocational education may experience situations during on-the-job training in which power relations are strongly manifested, with considerable potential for learning about democracy that have been far from fully explored. Thus, here we analyse how Swedish vocational education and training (VET) students perceived and experienced power relations during their workplace learning periods in upper secondary education, and discuss their experiences in the context of learning democratic rights. Interviewed students perceived power relations at workplaces in various ways. Most of them did not perceive the power relations as problematic, but a substantial proportion did, and expressed a need to talk about perceived power structures. This need concerned both how they personally felt positioned in power structures, and their perceived position of the profession they aimed to enter. The findings are discussed in relation to earlier arguments that VET often focuses much more strongly on learning skills than on learning democratic rights. A conclusion we draw is that schools could advantageously use students’ experiences of power relations as foundations for democratic learning.

Since mass education began at the start of the 19th century industrialisation there has been debate about whether certain knowledge is best acquired in schools or workplaces. This debate has particular relevance for vocational education and training (VET), especially in contexts where workplace learning is integrated in upper secondary VET programmes. The fundamental issue has still not been resolved, as illustrated by major variations in arrangements. For example, programmes for most upper secondary level VET students in European countries, including Sweden, are school-based, but in a few countries (e.g., Denmark and Germany) dual education prevails (Cedefop 2020). Further, VET is reportedly becoming more academic and general in some European countries, but more vocational in others (Cedefop 2020).

In this debate, it is often argued that schools are most suitable for providing students with theoretical and generic knowledge while workplaces can provide more practical and specific knowledge. This is also the main argument for regarding schools as more appropriate sites for developing the broader, generic competences required to become an active democratic (worker) citizen. The acquisition of insights into power relations and hierarchies in society and workplaces, together with the competence to analyse and problematise them, including one’s own position, is a key element of learning citizenship. Another is development of the ability to exercise democratic rights – to enact civic power, influence and active (vocational) citizenship. Citizenship competences of these kinds are

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more strongly associated with theoretical academic knowledge than with practical, manual and vocational knowledge (Durkheim 2001; Wheelahan 2007; Young 1993), and thus with school-based rather than workplace-based learning. Schools have a long tradition of teaching and learning theoretical knowledge, i.e. the kind of knowledge Wheelahan refers to as ‘the means that society uses to conduct its conversation about itself’ (2018, p. 240). In contrast, workplace learning takes place in market-oriented contexts where power relations, hierarchies and inequalities are often difficult to question and deconstruct (Bonvin and Laruffa 2018). Students must be given opportunities to reflect on, discuss and debate power relations, hierarchies and inequalities in society and institutions in safe learning environments, and workplaces are rarely appropriate sites, especially for debates or challenges initiated by students.

Thus, there seems to be a consensus in the literature that different institutional settings, for example schools and workplaces, have contextual variations that can promote different kinds of learning or knowledge acquisition. The issue has been addressed from various perspectives and with different approaches and conceptualisations. For example, Fuller and Unwin (2003) studied apprentices’ learning in three companies and introduced the concepts ‘expansive’ and ‘restricted’ learning environments. In restricted settings, there is only one place of learning (the workplace) and the apprentices do not circulate within the company. In contrast, in ‘expansive’ settings both schools and workplaces are used as sites for learning and apprentices are regularly shifted between different positions within a company, each of which provides opportunities for learning specific kinds of knowledge and promotes reflection on relations associated with the other positions, while Wheelahan (2018) uses the concepts of insularity and hybridity for similar discussions, arguing that insularity occurs more often in school-based settings. When students are provided with a curriculum based on the principle of insularity, they are provided with the means to recognise boundaries between different forms of knowledge, and within forms of knowledge, to use concepts and as their education progresses, to:

...choose, apply, contest, and modify relations between concepts. In contrast, when students are provided only with a curriculum based on the principle of hybridity, they are provided with access to contextually specific applications of knowledge, but not with the means of using different conceptual frameworks or with the criteria that are used within disciplines to judge the validity of knowledge claims. (p. 240)

Forms of knowledges are also discussed by Bonvin and Laruffa (2018), Kjeldsen and Bonvin (2015) and Schrörer (2015), using the concept capability approach. The common perception of researchers that school-based learning better facilitates the broader capabilities that apply to citizenship education is also widely held by politicians and policy-makers, who tend to rely more on academic than workplace settings when seeking to challenge generic issues such as power structures (Schrörer 2015). There has been a discussion about broadening of students’ learning in work settings for many years now, with important contributions addressing the issue at vocational education curriculum level (Kjeldsen and Bonvin 2015; Wheelahan 2016; Young 2010). It has also been addressed by scrutinising factors that influence students’ learning at work (Fuller and Unwin 2003), enhance social support at workplaces (Virtanen, Tynjälä, and Eteläpelto 2014), and improve assessments of workplace learning (Sandal, Smith, and Wangensteen 2014). Nevertheless, with few exceptions (Niemi and Jahnukainen 2019; Wheelahan 2007), vocational students’ experiences of power relations during workplace learning elements of upper secondary education have received little attention, despite their potential for assisting the students’ citizenship learning. The few published studies of this kind indicate that workplace-related learning is seldom used in school settings to emphasise critical perspectives and empower students (Virtanen and Tynjälä 2008).

Taking a student perspective, several studies have also found that VET students would like to learn more about politics (Ledman 2015), structural inequalities based on gender (Brunila and Ylöstalo 2015) and ethnicity (Rosvall et al. 2018; Rosvall and Öhrn 2014), and how to exert influence and exercise active citizenship (Furlong 2009). However, European cross-country studies have shown
that VET includes little education in political and historical issues (Ledman 2015), and stimulates less political participation than academic education (Persson 2012).

Against this background, the aim of the presented study is to analyse how a sample of Swedish VET students perceived and experienced power relations during their workplace learning periods in upper secondary education. Two research questions guided our work: What expressions of power relations did the students perceive, and How did they experience being positioned in structures of power, as both individuals and parts of a professional collective? In the final section, we discuss the students’ experiences of power relations in the wider perspective of citizenship learning, addressing power in relational terms. With Bernstein (2000, 4–7), we understand power as built into organisations, for example through division of labour, but is also formed and maintained through dynamic processes involving speech, actions and behaviour during both formal and informal interactions. In our exploration of VET students’ perceptions and experiences of power relations, we are interested in all of their diverse expressions and manifestations.

The Swedish context

All VET upper secondary programmes in Sweden are 3 years long, and they include in total 15 weeks of workplace learning. However, the organisation and supervision of workplace learning vary between programmes and schools. For programmes targeting vocations in large-scale (e.g. industrial or healthcare) sectors, the schools generally have more organised collaborations with local employers that provide more structured training, enabling students to try various kinds of relevant work during their workplace learning periods.

What VET education should contain and emphasise and how it should be organised has been debated throughout its history. A recent analysis of Swedish curricula highlights a shift in the emphasised role of VET since the 1970s from equalisation of social class towards promotion of entrepreneurship and employability (Lappalainen, Nylund, and Rosvall 2019). The study also revealed that attention to problems associated with gender and ethnicity has increased. In parallel, a reform in 2011 reduced time assigned to subjects usually associated with democratic learning (social science and Swedish), and increased time assigned to vocational subjects (Nylund, Rosvall, and Ledman 2017). Thus, more responsibility for fostering democratic citizens fell on the vocational subject teachers. In addition, industries, trade unions and future employers have become more involved in the organisation of VET and drafting associated policies in both Sweden (Olofsson and Persson Thunqvist 2018) and elsewhere, for example the UK (Bathmaker 2013) and Australia (Wheelahan 2018). The Swedish 2011 reform resulted in high proportions of context-bound learning, with strong behavioural elements. For example, current curriculum texts emphasise that VET students should learn to ‘do’ and ‘adapt’, while students in more academic programmes should learn to ‘think’ and ‘imagine possibilities’ (Nylund, Rosvall, and Ledman 2017).

In all Swedish compulsory and upper secondary education, fostering of democracy and citizenship is important. The introductory pages 4–14 of the curriculum covering all upper secondary education include general instruction regarding democratic values and state that school has the task of preparing students for work and active participation in society, ‘based on fundamental democratic values and the human rights we all share’ (Skolverket 2013, 5). This applies to all upper secondary programmes and all subjects. However, the subject syllabuses (particularly those of vocational subjects) do not always mention, or pay little attention to, the democratic values and competences stated in the introductory pages of the upper secondary curriculum. Thus, despite vocational subject teachers having more responsibility for fostering democratic citizens, democratic values and competences are vaguely described and weakly emphasised (if at all) in vocational subject syllabus plans. Moreover, it is up to the teacher to decide what content in the subject syllabus plan is relevant for the students’ workplace learning and what is to be evaluated.
Table 1. Pedagogic rights, definitions and associated capabilities according to Bernstein (2000).

| Right                      | Definition                                                                 | Capability                        |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Individual enhancement     | ‘The right to the means of critical understanding and to new possibilities’. | Confidence                        |
| Social inclusion           | ‘The right to be included socially, intellectually, culturally and personally [including the right to be autonomous’. | Belonging (in groups)             |
| Political participation    | ‘The right to participate in the construction, maintenance and transformation of social order’. | Civic discussion and action        |

Theoretical framework

Discussion of the outcome of vocational education often focuses on skills and competences (Schrörer 2015). When capabilities relevant to citizenship are addressed, emancipatory arguments are often highlighted, such as the importance of promoting VET students’ acquisition of ‘the knowledge that takes them beyond their experience and which they would be unlikely to have access to at home, at work or in the community’ (Young 2010, 5–6). Besides giving students access to this kind of expansive learning (cf. Fuller and Unwin 2003), the importance of including knowledge that gives the students capabilities for voice is also highlighted (Bonvin and Laruffa 2018; Schrörer 2015). That is, the importance of young people having a real say in what happens to them and being able to make choices (cf. Table 1, civic discussion and action).

When we analyse VET-education’s relevance for learning citizenship, including its potential to develop students’ capabilities for voice, we apply a theoretical framework presented by Bernstein (2000) that has been widely used in analyses and discussions of VET contexts (Gamble 2014; Wheelahan 2007; Young 2010). In accordance with Bernstein and other researchers he influenced, we argue that all students – regardless of socioeconomic background, gender and/or ethnicity – have fundamental educational rights, which Bernstein (2000) referred to as pedagogic rights. To facilitate empirical discussion and analysis of educational settings he distinguished the three rights listed and defined in Table 1. By exercising these rights, students develop crucial capabilities for citizenship: the capabilities of feeling confident, belonging (having a sense of social inclusion), and to participate in civic discussion and action.

We use this theoretical framework to analyse and discuss how workplace learning experiences in terms of power relations provide opportunities for, or hinder, development of confidence, feelings of belonging, and capabilities relevant to civic discussion and action. We are aware, as shown in the findings section, that feeling confident to tackle vocational tasks is crucial for vocational students, but since this study deals with more general citizen competences, we address confidence in a broader sense. Furthermore, we understand the three capabilities as intertwined and reinforcing each other. More specifically, we see confidence and belonging as requirements for development of the capability to participate in civic discussion and action. In relation to the scope of this study, we also see gaining insight into power relations and hierarchies in society and workplaces (including aspects linked to gender and ethnicity), and the ability to problematise them, as crucial for development of the capability to participate in civic discussion and action.

Method

This study draws on data obtained from semi-structured interviews, conducted in two research projects on Swedish VET in the 2018/2019 school year, with students enrolled on the Health & Social Care and Vehicle & Transport programmes in five schools. In three of the schools the authors of this article conducted the interviews personally, and interviews in the other two schools were also conducted by project colleagues. In total, the analysis draws on interviews with 74 students (43 Health & Social Care students and 31 Vehicle & Transport students) during their first, second and/or
third school year in the two programmes. The students were mostly interviewed individually or in pairs, but in a few cases groups of three were interviewed. The interviews ranged in duration from around 20 minutes to around 1 hr, and included a battery of questions about how the students valued their education. We did not ask the students specifically about ‘power relations’ in the workplace learning periods, but more generally asked them to tell us about their experiences during these periods, e.g., What problems and challenges did you encounter? One question focused specifically on experiences of trying to exert influence: Did you try to influence something at the workplace e.g. the work routines?

The analysis presented here draws on the students’ reflections on their workplace learning periods expressed in the interviews. The data were collaboratively coded and thematised by the authors in an iterative process, as suggested by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007). The first round of coding was influenced by the second research question: data were coded and sorted into an ‘individual-level’ theme and a ‘group-level’ theme (as in being part of a group of professionals). The second round of coding was more inductive: data were coded, data relevant to each code were assembled, then codes were clustered into potential sub-themes (six). Throughout the research process, we followed ethical principles published by the SwedishResearchCouncil (2017) regarding informed consent, confidentiality and integrity.

Findings

The students’ descriptions of their workplace learning periods in terms of power relations varied – some did not comment on them at all, or only briefly reflected on them, while others reflected on power relations of various kinds and problematised what they had experienced in the interviews. When scrutinising their comments and reflections, we identified two main themes: experiences of power relations at individual level and experiences of power relations at professional group level. We also identified four and two sub-themes of these themes, respectively, as described below.

Experiences of power relations at individual level

The four identified sub-themes related to experiences of power relations at individual level were Power relations narrated in terms of: social inclusion-exclusion, having/not having a say, having to do real work or ‘shitty jobs’, and gender and/or ethnicity.

Power relations narrated in terms of social inclusion-exclusion

In all the interviews, students expressed feelings of social inclusion or exclusion in terms of ‘good or ‘bad’ workplace experiences associated with feelings of being positioned within or outside the workplace community. This varied among both the students and workplaces, i.e., the same student could feel very different degrees of inclusion in different workplaces. Feelings of being or not being socially included were described in various ways, but always included some discernible expression of power relations. In the example below a boy described the feeling of not being socially included as a feeling of not being ‘welcomed’:

[… ] it’s a pity that all places are not so good. At some places you don’t feel welcomed. You get a feeling that they don’t want you there. (Vehicle & Transport student)

In terms of feelings of social inclusion/exclusion, the interviews revealed that the mentor had an important role:

I really think that my workplace learning periods were good. Or, I mean, it depends on the mentor. Actually the first period wasn’t that good. I really didn’t get along with my mentor and rarely saw her. But the other periods were good and I really got a chance to talk with and learn from my mentor. (Health & Social Care student)
Thus, the students’ degree of feeling included in, and belonging to, the work collective was strongly connected to the mentor’s performance and their reception. Several interviews also indicated that the mentor acted as a ‘gatekeeper’ who played a key role in their degree of inclusion and belonging to the work collective both socially and as members of working teams. This may be at least partly because students are often largely left to develop relationships themselves, which can be difficult for some students who are used to school practices, where teachers are more explicitly responsible for students’ integration (Niemi and Jahnukainen 2019).

Some of our interviewed students had received offers to work at one of the places they worked after graduation, and these students also attributed an important role to the mentor in the future. When asked about how he felt about ‘being on his own’, without a mentor, when starting to work at the workplace one of the boys answered:

All the people who work here know that I’m a beginner and understand the situation. Also, my mentor will still be here, so I can continue asking about things I need to know. (Vehicle & Transport student)

Thus, it seems that this workplace and the mentor contributed to inclusive practices.

**Power relations narrated as having/not having a say**

The mentor also acted as a gatekeeper in relation to participation in scheduled workplace meetings led by a head of section and union meetings led by a union official. Students invited to attend such meetings experienced participation in discussions about the future development of the workplace which they expressed in terms of working in a place with power relations that allowed them to have a say. Discussions in those meetings concerned matters such as working routines, working conditions, schedules and salaries, and participating students felt like contributors to developments in conditions and practices at the workplace, rather than simply passive subordinates. For example, a Vehicle & Transport student who spent one of his workplace learning periods at a small vehicle repair shop said that he had recurrently participated in workplace meetings and discussions on issues concerning the physical and social working environment, which made him feel important – like someone whose voice counted. Another student spoke of feeling happy when her mentor invited her to a workplace meeting. The invitation itself contributed to her feeling of being socially included, as did her treatment during the meeting – in which people showed they wanted to hear her voice by asking about her opinions and experiences:

I sat in the meeting and listened when they talked about how to handle a difficult situation. Out of the blue one asked me if she remembered correctly that my workplace learning period was divided between two workplaces. I answered “Yes”, then she asked me if I had an opinion since I had experience from the other workplace. When I sat there and listened I had actually thought about how they could improve, but as a trainee I didn’t feel like a person with a say. Her asking about my opinion really made me feel like part of the group. (Health & Social Care student).

However, only a few students mentioned experiences of participation in scheduled workplace meetings. Most had not been invited to participate in such meetings during periods of workplace learning, and felt excluded from the ongoing discussions at the workplace and at the bottom of the hierarchy – someone with no power, or even a say.

**Power relations narrated as having to do ‘real work’ or ‘the shitty jobs’**

Tasks the students were asked (and allowed) to perform differed strongly between workplaces. Some reported that they were not allowed to do the same things as their mentors or other colleagues, and only what they called ‘simple’ things. Their responses in interviews indicated that this made the students feel subordinate and exploited, and learned that such subordination and exploitation is simply ‘how it is’, part of the ‘structure’:
Boy 1: You get to do the shitty jobs. That’s how it is. As a trainee or new worker you need to work your way up. You start with things . . .

Boy 2: . . . no one else wants to do.

Boy 1: Like, changing brakes, service and such, then you work your way up. (Vehicle & Transport students)

Being assigned too much of ‘the shitty jobs’ led to feelings of being at the bottom of the hierarchy/power structure in the workplace and being used – having to perform tasks that no one else wanted to do. One of the Health & Social Care students described the feeling as follows:

[. . .] you don’t have much power at work, you’re only training to do the job for the future, this makes you feel worth a bit less than the others. (Health & Social Care student)

The importance of being able to perform ‘real’ tasks and thus feel like part of the work collective has also been noted in other studies. As reviewed by Panican and Paul (2019), the kinds of work students encounter during workplace learning periods varies greatly – some are offered work that broadens and deepens vocational skills, while others have access to very narrow professional knowledge. This also applies to apprenticeships, according to a previous study of the Swedish Trade & Administration programme (Kristmansson, 2016).

**Power relations narrated as related to gender and/or ethnicity**

Experiences of power relations in the workplaces were also linked to gender. Girls in the Health and Social Care classes talked about males being treated better than themselves and other females in the workplaces where they spent their work periods in terms of attention and appreciation. For example, one of the female Health & Social Care students said:

You get more appreciation if you’re male. For example, there was a guy at my department where there were nine or ten women. They gave this male a lot of attention. Not because he did more work than the ladies, just because he was male, not female. (Health and Social Care students)

The student quoted here, and others we interviewed, had clearly noted and reflected on gender-related power issues and structures, and wanted to talk about it in the interviews. Another gendered issue raised in the interviews was sexual harassment. Some Health & Social Care students said that at their workplaces they had been warned of patients that were known to engage in this. One girl had been told, ‘Don’t turn your back on him’ [a patient]. She confessed that she had never been harassed by patients during her workplace learning period, but still felt scared. However, other students referred to actually being sexually harassed during their workplace learning periods. For example one female Vehicle & Transport student described being exposed to brutal verbal sexual harassment during individual supervision in a truck cabin. She said that she did not act when it happened, but told her school teacher about what had happened later, and said she would act differently today:

Today I would have told him off immediately. I would never have kept my mouth shut. But I guess you need thick skin to work in this trade. I guess that many girls don’t dare to raise their voices and only do what they’re told. I would never do that, but rather say what I think about things. (Vehicle & Transport student)

As touched upon above, there were some differences between the programmes in terms of students’ experiences of sexual harassment. For example, it was more commonly associated with patients by the Health & Social Care students and with colleagues by Vehicle and Transport students.

Another issue raised during the interviews was ethnicity. None of the interviewed Vehicle & Transport students were born outside Sweden. However, some of the Health & Social Care students were, and a few of them discussed xenophobia or racism, either implicitly or explicitly. One girl said that some patients at a geriatric care home where she worked during a workplace learning period were racist. She also said that she was not allowed to visit some patients because of her ethnicity and wishes of the patients:
Girl: Are you allowed to say racist?

Interviewer: Yes, you can say racist.

Girl: Ok, there were racists, and I couldn't go to their homes. One woman and one man. (Health & Social Care student)

When the issue was raised in the interviews the students were asked what they thought about this and how it was handled at the workplaces:

Boy: Usually it's possible to adjust the schedules so no one with an immigrant background needs to visit a racist patient.

Interviewer: How do you feel about this?

Boy: I guess we react differently. Someone who works here get angry when she hears about her schedule being adjusted so she won't meet patients with racist attitudes because of her immigrant background.

Another student, a girl, said she is glad because she would not cope with hearing racist comments all the time:

I'm a little in-between. You know that they [the patients] are wrong, but you have to give them care. (Health & Social Care student)

One girl also referred to harassment being influenced by media reports, especially if there were negative reports of events involving immigrants:

Girl: Do you remember the truck attack at Queens Road?

Interviewer: Yes!

Girl: I had my workplace learning during that period. All was going well, but after the terrorist attack some patients were like completely different. It was almost as if I had attacked, or at least as if all Muslims are the same. It was the last week of my workplace learning period. That week I ran straight home after work and jumped into my bed sobbing every night. (Health & Social Care student)

She interpreted her experience of being treated differently by the users before and after the attack as an expression of how these people generalised and ethnified the event. She felt that the trust she had built up with the patients was ruined in a single day, and had difficulty seeing how, or even if, her confidence could be rebuilt.

**Experiences of power relations at professional group level**

The students' narrations of power relations at broader, group level formed two sub-themes: *Power relations narrated as dominant-subordinated positions* and *power relations narrated as unchangeable structures*.

**Power relations narrated as dominant-subordinated positions**

Several students' comments revealed that during the workplace periods they had become aware of the low status of the work they were training to do, and subordinate positions of the workers. They spoke about this being often discussed at their workplaces. For example, the low wage and the working conditions were frequently raised topics:

I had my workplace practice at a home for elderly people with dementia. The people who worked there were kind of depressed. Most of the staff had aches—back pain and such like. There were lots of comments about the bosses being no good, not only at their place but in the trade overall. (Health & Social Care student)
A lot of people at the workplace kept saying that the salary’s low. And that’s true. And still we take care of people, we don’t work with computers. Still you get low salary compared to if you work with other things. (Health & Social Care student)

A substantial proportion of the Health & Social Care students said they had been told not to start working in the trade because of its low status, low wages and poor working conditions. In those situations they were advised to go to university. For example, a female Health and Social Care student said, ‘The staff told me, don’t train as an assistant nurse. It’s not a good job. Continuing studies at university is better.’ Similarly, a boy with immigrant background told us:

An old woman who comes from where I come from said, “I came to Sweden when I was old. I’m too old to get an education. You’re young, you can do something less hard and earn more”. (Health & Social Care student)

The students’ reflections regarding their workplace experiences also concerned the gendered character of the profession, and gendered pattern of subordination:

There are more women than men, and the men work in geriatric or home care. So you don’t see many men. (Health & Social Care student)

Boy 1: I got to know that if you’re a man, you’ll get higher wages.

Girl 1: It’s how it is in all vocations.

Boy 1: Many people where I had my workplace training said that this trade is badly paid. You can’t dispute it! We take care of humans, not computers, but wages are still low.

Girl 1: There are more women in geriatric care and home care service. You see almost no men there.

Boy 3: Yes, trades for men, like Volvo, they want women, trades for women they want men.

Boy 1: And they offer higher wages for men. That’s what I’ve been told. That if I signed up for locum work I’d be called directly and offered higher wages, because I’m a man. (Health & Social Care student)

Experience of the trade’s subordination was less apparent in interviews with the Vehicle & Transport students, probably because their trade (like most male-dominated trades) has higher status and provides more secure full time job opportunities with higher wages (cf. Ledman, Rosvall, and Nylund 2018).

**Power relations as unchangeable structures**

During workplace learning periods the students (especially Health & Social Care students) often met people who were frustrated about their working conditions. However, they did not seem to learn how to exercise agency and power from these individuals, because (according to the students) they remained passive and did not challenge things that annoyed them. One of the girls responded as follows when asked about how people who expressed frustration handled the situation:

You know, they don’t do anything. They’ve complained for a long time. They’ve lost the urge to complain. A lot quitted and many were sad. The only thing you can do is to quit or change unit. (Health & Social Care student)

Consequently, many students did not think that their workplace practice had contributed to knowledge about how to exercise agency and power in a manner relevant to civic discussions and citizenship. Generally, they did not feel that they were in a position, or had been trained, to exercise influence. They did not think that they had had much possibility to talk about issues related to the social working environment. Many of the interviewed students expressed a major discrepancy. They related experiences of power and agency during their workplace learning periods in a highly engaged and animated fashion during the interviews, but said they had very rarely discussed associated issues either during their workplace learning periods or in school. This included reflections on how to exercise agency and power in direct interactions with supervisors,
colleagues and co-workers, as well as their experience of their worker positions, and power and agency in Swedish society as a whole. For example, their experience of how their work was valued in relation to other trades both socially, as in status, and materially, as in wages, had been rarely (if ever) discussed.

As shown in the Experiences of power relations at individual level section, the students experienced power relations that they narrated in terms of social inclusion-exclusion, having/not having a say, being given real work or ‘shitty jobs’, and treatments relevant to gender and/or ethnicity. They narrated both positive descriptions of their workplace learning periods (conveying feelings of being socially included, belonging and having a say) and negative descriptions (conveying the opposite feelings, and concerns related to ethnicity and/or gender). Higher levels of inclusion, e.g. in meetings or interactions with high ranking staff or officials where issues related to conditions in the workplace or the trade generally were discussed, seemed to boost their confidence and experience of more equal power relations in the workplaces. Furthermore, as demonstrated in the Experiences of power relations at professional group level section, the students recognised workplaces’/vocations’ status as gendered in society. Health and Social Care vocations, which they understood as being female-coded, were associated with low wages and bad working conditions to a higher degree than Vehicle & Transport vocations, which they understood as traditionally male-dominated. Comments associated with this theme also highlighted variations among students in terms of identification with the trade. This particularly applied to the Health & Social Care students. The boys distanced themselves from the health and social care discourse more often than the girls, and talked differently about the trade, clearly indicating a gendered pattern of identity formation, and social belonging in relation to vocation and trade.

Overall, there was a clear contrast between the two themes. Experiences of power relations at individual level were narrated as part of both positive and negative stories about workplace learning periods, for example in feeling both socially included and excluded. However, the narrations of Experiences of power relations at group level theme were mostly negative, which we interpreted as reflecting hierarchies within and among vocations and trades in education and society at large (Nylund, Rosvall, and Ledman 2017; Schrörer 2015).

Discussion

As stated by Bernstein (2000) among others (Bonvin and Laruffa 2018; Schrörer 2015; Wheelahan 2018), to maintain a democracy we need to foster citizens who are capable of giving voice, exerting influence and exercising agency. As argued in this article, learning citizenship involves (inter alia) acquisition of insights into structures of power and hierarchies in society and workplaces and competence to analyse and problematise them. In VET this includes structures and practices encountered in workplaces during training periods, which can, as our empirical data show, contribute to development of students’ specific skills and civic knowledge (in Bernstein’s terminology: confidence, sense of social inclusion and preparedness to participate in civic discussion and action).

Narration of students who both spoke positively about their workplace learning periods and those who were more negative often included elements of experienced subordination, although their emphasis on this issue differed. As the students commonly experienced power structures, their experiences could arguably provide valuable teaching material, especially in follow-ups at school of the workplace learning periods (particularly as substantial proportions of the students seemed to want to talk about power relations they had found problematic, and it has potential for democratic learning). However, according to the interviewed students, their experiences were seldom used in this fashion, cf. expansive learning (Fuller and Unwin 2003). Thus, students were arguably seldom trained to exert agency in their future working life, in relation to subordination both generally and in relation to gender and ethnicity.

Given the strong emphasis in the curriculum on ‘open discussions and active measures’ and our empirical finding that the students wanted to talk about issues related to power, gender and
ethnicity, it might appear puzzling that the interviewed students referred to few occasions when teachers initiated such discussions. However, it is consistent with at least two previous findings suggest. First, teachers often reportedly avoid sensitive issues because they seem to be worried about losing control of discussions (Bentrovato, Korostelina, and Schulze 2016). Related concerns associated with racism seem to have risen in Sweden since members of a right wing nationalist party, the Swedish Democrats, were elected to the parliament in 2010, which seems to have exacerbated difficulties in rejecting xenophobic arguments because they are contrary to democratic values. Second, contrary to clauses in the Swedish curricula, issues related to civic discussions have often been associated with more general subjects, such as social science or Swedish language, rather than vocational subjects (Nylund, Rosvall, and Ledman 2017). Moreover, VET teachers reportedly believe that VET should focus on specific skills, rather than more general issues, to meet employers’ demands and enhance the students’ employability (Eiriksdottir and Rosvall 2019), which results in restricted learning even though both schools and workplaces are used as sites for learning (Fuller and Unwin 2003).

However, neither the students nor the teachers can be expected to be drivers of required changes. For this, changes in the curriculum are needed. General descriptions of democratic values are included in the first 14 pages of the upper secondary curriculum in Sweden, covering overarching values that are supposed to be incorporated in all elements of schooling. Our research show that they rarely are included in Swedish VET. Thus, with the student interviews as a platform, we argue that those values must be stressed in the more specific subject plans in order to be implemented in practice. For example, the current Swedish curricula and sparse regulations concerning the organisation of workplace practice gives students little space to reflect on issues such as the difficulties in caring for racist patients raised by Health & Social Care students, either at the workplace or in their school-based learning. Better treatment in the curricula of the theoretical concepts of pedagogic rights, restrictive and expansive participation, and insularity and hybridity, could enable amendment of workplace learning periods to give the students access to, and try, different positions and professions within the targeted trades. Back in school, an amended curriculum could foster reflection upon and discussion of relations and experiences linked to issues such as racism during workplace learning. Thus, the Health & Social Care students would have opportunities to choose, apply, contest, and modify relations between concepts such as racism through the experience of having followed an assistant nurse, head of section and department scheduler. Such curricula would provide possibilities of expansive participation that would foster through understanding of relations between positions and related concepts, thereby preparing the students for civic discussion and action within future workplaces. The current Swedish curricula do not promote such practices since the more specific subject plans that govern practices more than the general introductory curriculum pages are largely oriented towards specific methods and skills.

Our interviews and observations indicate that most students’ workplace learning periods contributed to their confidence in their vocational skills and ability to tackle trade-specific tasks. One conclusion we draw is that most students had positive experiences of education regarding individual development and social inclusion, at least trade-specific aspects. On the other hand, both during their work placed learning and school-based follow-ups they gained less valuable knowledge and skills for future workplace participation related to the third pedagogic right: civic discussion and political participation, that is, knowledge and skills that give students’ power to understand and influence society generally and their own lives particularly in a broader context (Bernstein 2000). To paraphrase Wheelahan (2018), they had little exposure to curricular elements based on the principle of insularity which we understand as crucial for developing capability to participate in civic discussions as such curriculum opens up for reflective, problematising and analysing practices.

The students’ descriptions of how such issues were addressed in school indicate that they received little training in relating to and questioning conditions in the outside world (in this case the workplaces), and will have limited opportunities to develop abilities to discern and challenge power structures in their becoming. With the help of a teacher it might be possible for students to
process their experiences of power structures during their workplace learning periods and prepare them to identify similar structures in their future workplaces and the capability to act as fully engaged citizens (cf Kjeldsen and Bonvin 2015). That is, interviewed students seemed capable of identifying power structures, which implicitly has the curricular implication that with a little help from their teachers they might be able to see not only what is but also what could be. Consequently, citizenship is not only important for healthy, democratic civil society and an important element of subjects such as social science and history, it is also important for development of one’s occupation and relations in workplaces.

Lastly, we would like to repeat our most important conclusion and stress that we should not expect teachers to be the driving force in implementing content and organisation expanding students’ reflections, discussions and debates on democratic values in relation to workplace learning periods. Vocational teachers are recruited from the labour market and have usually been fostered in a discourse of ‘being employable’ that is restricted to the learning of procedures rather than expanded to the learning of democratic values (Eiriksdottir and Rosvall 2019). Thus, hope for a change lies in change of the curriculum, and in Sweden the more general description of democratic values in the introductory pages of the curriculum needs to be repeated in the specific passages of subject syllabuses regarding students’ learning and its evaluation during workplace learning periods.

A note on methodology

It should be noted that relatively few students mentioned harassment associated with gender or ethnicity, compared to previously reported frequencies, some based on anonymous surveys commissioned by related trade unions (Bergold 2018; Byggnads 2019; Mörvik 2018). Moreover, our sample was small. The low frequencies of references to harassment in our interviews may be at least partly due to interviewing students individually or in groups, face to face, which may increase some interviewees’ reluctance to discuss sensitive matters. Nevertheless, the findings are generalisable through what Larsson (2009) calls ‘generalisation through context similarity’ and ‘generalisation through recognition of patterns’.

The observations throughout the paper refer to arrangements before disruption by the Covid-19 pandemic. We have no means of predicting the short – and long-term effects of the pandemic in Sweden and elsewhere.

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