VET teachers’ learning in feminised vocations- a comparative study of Swedish floristry and hairdressing teachers

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the continuing professional learning of Swedish hairdressing and floristry teachers, based on semi-structured interviews with six experienced female teachers. The research question that guided the work asks what continuing professional learning do experienced floristry and hairdressing teachers undertake in relation to their vocational field and to pedagogy. The analysis applies concepts from the theory of practice architectures, and focuses upon the sayings, doings and relations that surface in the interview data. The findings indicate that the VET teachers handle their learning relatively independently of the schools at which they are employed. Furthermore, more personal agency was required from the floristry teachers, than from the hairdressing teachers for whom organised business interests provide ample education and training opportunities. The article argues that the VET teachers who rely on themselves and their colleagues can control their own continuing professional learning at their place of work.

KEYWORDS
Floristry; hairdressing; professional learning; ecologies of practice; agency

Introduction

It has been shown that the knowing\(^1\) and skills required in many vocations are subject to rapid changes due to globalisation, digitalisation, changing life patterns and other factors. Developing vocational education that responds to these changes is a challenge (Lehtinen et al., 2014). The outcome of efforts to overcome this challenge depends on the potential for vocational education and training (VET) teachers to learn and develop a dual identity (e.g., Andersson & Köpsén, 2018; Fejes & Köpsén, 2014) that simultaneously encompasses vocation-specific and pedagogic content. Against this backdrop, the current article explores the continuing professional learning of Swedish floristry and hairdressing teachers, with the aim to further a comparative understanding of the site-based learning of these two groups of VET teachers. The following research question was developed to guide the work: **What continuing professional learning do experienced floristry and hairdressing teachers undertake in relation to their vocational field and to pedagogy?**
Feminised vocations not in focus in vocational education research

Learning through working life (Carlsgren et al., 2010; Malloch, 2010) is a large, international area of research concerned with, among other things, learning organisations (Ellström, 2004), expansive learning (Toiviainen & Engeström, 2009) and the prerequisites for learning in the workplace (Billett & Choy, 2013; Hull, 1999). From a Swedish perspective, research about VET teachers’ continuing learning has pointed to the importance of activities involving people that are active in the vocation as well as their places of work, emphasising that formal continuing education and training are not the only ways to stimulate VET teachers to keep pace with developments in pedagogy and in their teaching areas (e.g., Andersson & Köpsén, 2018).

Both floristry and hairdressing are traditionally female-dominated vocations (Statistics Sweden, 2018; Gåfvels, 2016a), and as such they share many traits with other relatively low-status female-dominated service-sector vocations. Currently, both floristry and hairdressing are part of the Swedish upper secondary handicraft programme, and 94 per cent of students are female (Skolverket, 2019). Meanwhile, the majority of research conducted about vocational education, examines male-dominated vocations (e.g., Martin, 1994; Broberg, Wärvik, & Lindberg, forthcoming). There is relatively little research on the craft of floristry and floristry education (Gåfvels, 2016a, 2016b), whereas the craft of hairdressing and hairdressing education have been studied more often (Klope, 2015). Furthermore, as claimed by Holmes (2015), the ‘focus upon male-oriented professions’ and ‘nostalgia for a romantic craft past’ (p. 483) have occasionally obscured the picture of the workers, leading her to expand Sennett’s (2009) theorising about the craft worker to include female-dominated service-sector vocations and making it more applicable to contemporary situations.

Interconnected and mutually influencing practices in the vocational fields

This article applies a sociocultural approach (Säljö, 2010, 2015; Wertsch, 1998) and is informed by the practice theory turn (Schatzki et al., 2001). The article’s starting points are the relational view of knowing (Carlsgren, 2015) and the concept of site-based learning. Like Brennan Kemmis and Green (2013), and Choy et al. (2016), concepts from the theory of practice architectures have been used to investigate practices in sites of VET. The main concepts used are ‘sayings’, ‘doings’ and ‘relatings’ which Kemmis and Grootenboer (2008) identify as the actions that are involved in practices. These practices, realised in everyday interactions between people and objects, are subject to temporal and spatial conditions (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008). The physical space-time of any given practice corresponds to its doings, whereas sayings and relatings correspond to semantic and social spaces, respectively (e.g., Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, & Choy, 2017b). Practice traditions carry previous sayings, doings and relatings of practices (Mahon, 2017). In that way, practice traditions form part of the practice architectures of a site.

The theory of ‘ecologies of practices’ (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008), which is a sub-theory of the theory of practice architectures, has been used in the analysis in the current study. The theory of ‘ecologies of practices’ highlights how practices are interconnected. As will be shown by the analysis and the results, the two vocational fields of floristry and hairdressing are respectively interconnected to different practices. It is important to note
that no single practice is without ‘contestation, struggle or tension’ (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, & Choy, 2017a, p. 14) and thus a critical approach is warranted. To be able to adopt such an approach, and in order to understand ‘individuals engaged in a practice’ (Chaiklin, 1993, p. 378), the sociohistorical context needs to be taken into account.

**Method**

Empirical data were generated by semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1997) with six VET teachers from different schools. The interviews were held in Swedish. Complementary questions were later asked to one of the teachers, to help explain previous answers and thereby facilitate comparison.

Characteristics of the teachers, and their schools, are described in Table 1. Three are floristry teachers, three are hairdressing teachers. All teachers are female. All six have journeyman and master certificates and nine or more years of experience working in the vocation. They all have a VET teacher degree, and an average of thirteen years of teaching experience. Two teachers teach in independent upper secondary schools, three teach in municipal upper secondary schools, and one teaches in an independent adult education school. Together, the teachers represent the main forms of current organisation of vocational education in Sweden.

The analytical process makes use of a comparative method (e.g., Bray et al., 2014; Schriewer, 2006) with three main steps. The first step was production of data and transcription of the interviews. To familiarise with the data corpus, several rounds of reading and rereading took place, including different attempts to visualise key content. This led to the relatively early choice of using the concepts of ‘sayings, doings and relatings’ to structure the data, inspired by an approach used by Brennan Kemmis and Green (2013).

The second step of the analytical process involved forming themes related to the theoretical framework. These themes, used in the later process, resulted from a reiterative process of concentration of meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), using a form of basic analytic tables and extensive colour coding to help the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The tables were structured on the basis of theory, as previously mentioned, combined with the categories stipulated by the comparative setup.

In the third and final step, the process of using analytic tables resulted in Tables 2 and 3 that are displayed in the findings section of this article. In other words, no authentic individual answers are presented in the tables. However, an in-depth analysis based on individual answers – an analysis of which the tables form part – is presented in text in connection with each table, and some of these individual answers are quoted. To improve comprehension and readability, changes were made to the quotes during the process of translation. At this stage of the process, the themes that had been generated were subjected to critical questions and deeper analysis.

**Findings**

A central component of the analytical process was comparison between the group of floristry teachers and the group of hairdressing teachers and between the two sides of the
Table 1. Overview of participants.

| Journeyman and master certificates | Floristry teacher 1 | Floristry teacher 2 | Floristry teacher 3 | Hairdressing teacher 1 | Hairdressing teacher 2 | Hairdressing teacher 3 |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| Years working in the vocation      | x                   | x                   | x                   | x                      | x                      | x                      |
| Years working as VET teacher       | 9                   | 12                  | 9                   | 14                     | 12                     | 25                     |
| School organisation (organiser)    | Upper secondary school (municipal school) | Upper secondary school (municipal school) | Adult education school (independent school) | Upper secondary school (independent school) | Upper secondary school (independent school) | Upper secondary school (municipal school) |
teachers’ dual identities, which employ vocation-specific and pedagogic content. The findings are presented based on the structure inherent in this combination of (a) the research question, (b) the dual identities of VET teachers, and (c) the fact that two vocational areas are compared.

The empirical case is organised into two parts. Part (i) concerns what continuing professional learning teachers undertake in relation to their vocational field: floristry and hairdressing respectively. Part (ii) of the empirical case focuses on what continuing professional learning teachers undertake in relation to pedagogy.

(i) Continuing professional learning in relation to vocational field

The sayings, doings and relatings of both teacher groups are very similar (see Table 2), and in many respects, the differences are a question of nuances. This is the case in regard to the teachers’ sayings about learning in collaboration with other colleagues, within the school and within the trade, and learning through visiting students in their work-based training.

All teachers stress the importance of personal interest as the main driver of vocational learning. However, floristry teachers also emphasise the role of personal agency. Moreover, there are some minor differences in the views and sayings regarding how the two groups of teachers can influence their own learning. The floristry teachers note that they have significant opportunities to influence their learning as long as there is a realistic plan, financial aspects are taken into account and they are willing to handle everything themselves, as expressed by Floristry Teacher 2:

Table 2. Sayings, doings and relatings regarding vocational learning.

| Sayings | Floristry teachers | Floristry and Hairdressing teachers | Hairdressing teachers |
|---------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Agency is an important driver of vocational learning. | Personal interest is the main driver of vocational learning. | Companies are invited to show products as part of training programmes. An influential national membership organisation for hairdressing teachers provides ample training and education opportunities. |
| It is difficult to find relevant training events. | | |
| Training in other crafts (pottery etc.) is an alternative due to its resemblance to floristry training. | | |
| Doings | Invite inspiring guests from the business to participate in training. | Use social media, including Instagram and YouTube. Visit students during their work-based training. | Attend regular meetings organised by influential national membership organisation for hairdressing teachers, at school or elsewhere. |
| Arrange workshops and events in which both students and teachers can participate. | Financial aspects determine what can be achieved. | Arrange visits by hair product companies and other professionals. |
| Relatings | National membership organisation aims to establish vocational standards. | Site-based communication with colleagues is an important source of inspiration. | The influential national membership organisation provides training and education. |
| Vocational competitions provide opportunities for teachers to interact. | School management lacks an understanding of vocational knowing. | Hair product companies have incentives to contact teachers. |
If you do not expect the school to pay for it, then you can do what you want, because we have quite a lot of leeway. […] There is always a possibility to do what you want to if you can present a complete solution to the headmaster.

The floristry teachers also note that, at the personal level, there are no limits regarding the development of skills in their craft. The following comment is representative of comments made by all the floristry teachers:

My interest is so strong that I believe I will do craft-related things all the time. I can have different phases in which I develop either floristry or some other type of craft. (Floristry Teacher 1)

In their doings, the floristry teachers regularly rely on their own agency, inviting external florists and arranging workshops that can be attended not only by students but also teachers who have time to do so.

The three hairdressing teachers frequently arrange for external hairdressers to visit their classes. While this contributes new ideas and approaches that are valuable for both students and teachers, the guests are working for specific hair product companies – with different brands of hairdressing products – and their purpose is to promote their products. In contrast, the florists invited by the floristry teachers tend to be their own brands and have little or no direct relation to specific products. Brands that are marketing products have an incentive to establish contact and good relations with VET teachers. This results in hairdressing teachers having good access to external guests. As Hairdressing Teacher 3 says:

[…] we invite companies here to show [their products]. And one of the approaches that we use is to switch the brand of products [to get input from a new/different company] […].

In addition to brands that are marketing products, the hairdressing teachers benefit from a well-established and influential professional organisation with close ties to the hairdressing business. This organisation arranges regular education and training sessions at the national and local level, which all interviewed hairdressing teachers say they attend more or less frequently. Also, the hairdressing teachers emphasise having a good dialogue with their professional organisation, and that they are able to influence the content of professional learning provided by the organisation. In sum, there is a strong relationship between the hairdressing teacher profession and the professional organisation. The floristry teachers also have a professional organisation, but they do not attach the same significance to it as the hairdressing teachers do regarding their professional organisation.

According to the hairdressing teachers – and in parallel to how the floristry teachers perceive their situation – it is they themselves cooperating with their colleagues, and not school management, that take full responsibility for the continuing development of vocational knowing. Hairdressing Teacher 1 explains why teachers take responsibility for their vocational learning:

You need courses and inspiration and new knowing, […] there is not much point in having teachers who are very skilled in the wrong things.

Current work in the vocation they are teaching about is an important source of learning for many of the teachers. Two of the hairdressing teachers stress that they continue to work as hairdressers in addition to their full-time jobs as teachers, which helps them keep pace with developments in the field. None of the floristry teachers continue to work in
floristry shops, but two of them occasionally work at large events. The floristry teachers say that it is difficult for them to find adequate courses to support their vocational knowing. In the words of Floristry Teacher 2:

It [a course on floristry] is hard to find […] it is rather a case of us inviting someone to come to school to help us find inspiration.

Both teacher groups note that, thanks to social media, it is always possible to access professional learning opportunities. Floristry Teacher 3 is positive about the technical development:

Nowadays, it is easy to access Instagram pictures, watch YouTube material and that kind of stuff, which becomes a type of education as well, even if you no longer actively go anywhere physically. That possibility did not even exist ten years ago; then, you had to go somewhere […] There are more possibilities today, but it takes a bit more effort from yourself.

Both the hairdressing teachers and the floristry teachers identify a lack of support from school management regarding vocational learning. Furthermore, both groups agree with Hairdressing Teacher 1 that management also tends to lack an understanding of vocational knowing:

The boss [headmaster] has only worked in school and does not understand that vocational knowing needs to be practiced regularly.

To sum up, the sayings, doings and relatings described above indicate that the teachers handle their vocational learning relatively independently of the schools at which they are employed.

**(ii) Continuing professional learning in relation to pedagogy**

When it comes to pedagogic learning, the differences – as compared to vocational learning – are more pronounced between the two teacher groups. Nonetheless, there are notable similarities (see Table 3), particularly regarding what is perceived as the lacklustre role of school management, as well as the benefits of site-based learning with colleagues.

**Table 3.** Sayings, doings and relatings regarding pedagogic learning.

|                      | Floristry teachers | Floristry and Hairdressing teachers | Hairdressing teachers |
|----------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| **Sayings**          | There is a need to work with assessment more often together with other floristry teachers. | Lectures for all teaching staff are held a couple of times each year. There is no specialised content for VET teachers. Many students have neuropsychiatric diagnoses (such as ADHD), and ensuing special needs. | There is a need to work with assessment on a general level. There should be more focus on neuropsychiatric diagnoses (such as ADHD), and special needs support. |
| **Doings**           | Organise their own special needs support education. | Financial aspects determine what can be achieved. | Take part in each other’s classes. |
| **Relatings**        | A national membership organisation provides opportunities for floristry teachers to meet and assess vocational tests. | School management’s stance on educating school staff has an impact on teachers. Engage in site-based learning with colleagues. | An influential national membership organisation for hairdressing teachers provides education and training. |
What school management chooses to do or not to do plays an important role in the pedagogy-related learning of both groups of teachers. All teachers emphasise that there is no specialised content for VET teachers. The schools where the teachers are employed, regularly (i.e. one or two times per year) arrange lectures for all teaching staff covering general pedagogic content related to changes to mandatory curriculum; as well as pedagogy-related issues stemming from the implementation of equal treatment plans, anti-bullying procedures and the like. Floristry Teacher 2 gives an additional example of management-initiated activity, involving a digital pedagogic platform:

[...] it has been driven by school management, that now we [...] will learn this [computerised] system [...] it is something everyone should do because everyone should be on the same level.

She also explains that her work team, on their own initiative, started to discuss pedagogic issues for 15 minutes at their regular meetings to avoid the previous situation, which was characterised by ‘too much talk about organisation and too little talk about pedagogics’ (Floristry Teacher 2). Overall, all interviewed teachers emphasise, with differing wording, how valuable it is to them to gain perspective on their own teaching practice through working closely together with others who have the same role. Both groups of teachers occasionally struggle to find opportunities for continuing pedagogic learning, both in school and in their spare time in the private sphere. However, the role of personal agency emerges as necessarily more central to the pedagogic learning of the floristry teachers. In a tone similar to her above-quoted colleague, one of the floristry teachers describes her frequent procedure when encountering a ‘pedagogical challenge’ in her daily teaching:

[...] it happens quite often that I read in order to think about how to organise something, that is I read pedagogic literature, or articles on the Internet [...] (Floristry Teacher 1)

The role of the respective professional organisation for each of the teacher groups in relation to pedagogy-related support varies, and this impacts on what is available for the participants in this study. Hairdressing Teacher 3 notes that:

As hairdressing teachers, we do have our organisation which is quite stable and well-functioning. It regularly offers courses, in pure subject matter but also special needs support [...] (Hairdressing Teacher 3)

Unlike the hairdressing organisation, the floristry teachers’ professional organisation does not offer pedagogy-related support. The organisation was founded by teachers and essentially serves to provide opportunities for floristry teachers to meet to jointly assess vocational tests and thereby establish standards for upper secondary vocational floristry education. Assessment together with other teachers is a topic that both groups of teachers consider important for continuously increasing capabilities.

Special needs support, which was mentioned in the previous quote, is a particularly interesting area. Independently of each other, five of the six teachers single out its importance, despite no apparent cues in the questions asked of them. Hairdressing Teacher 2 explains her situation:

[...] back when I started working as a teacher, then you hardly knew what it was, it was more like someone ‘probably has ADHD’ [...] Nowadays it is outspoken and you know more. But the more you know, the less you know in a way, or kind of we know more about it but we do not know how.
One of the other two hairdressing teachers echoes this:

[... ] we have a very big amount of students with diagnoses [... ] First of all I would need to learn what the different diagnoses really entail. Because I do not think that I really know. (Hairdressing Teacher 3)

The two groups of teachers have different strategies regarding the perceived need for more special needs support knowing. All three hairdressing teachers say they would like more of it. However, they do not provide examples of what they themselves have done to change this situation. In contrast, both of the two floristry teachers who see a need for more special needs support knowing have made efforts to provide such learning opportunities. One organised her own special needs course at her school. The other floristry teacher – without the knowledge of school management – found time to study at the university level to become a special needs teacher with the help of cooperative colleagues covering for her when she was away.

It is important to note that one of the three floristry teachers provides a picture quite different from that provided by the other five teachers, regarding special needs support. The teacher in question is the only one who works in an independent adult education school at which classes are entirely financed by students themselves and no national curriculum needs to be taken into account. She does not express any need for special needs support, and later explains that her students occasionally being ‘different’ is due to burnout syndrome combined with low self-esteem. Thus, in some respects, VET classes in the independent adult education school have a different context than in upper secondary VET classes.

Summing up how the two groups of teachers manage their pedagogic learning, what has been described above indicates that they perceive the pedagogy-related professional learning provided by their employers to be of limited use to them. Also, more personal agency was required from the floristry teachers, than from the hairdressing teachers, in relation to their own professional learning, especially as shown in the case of special needs support.

Discussion

Taken together, the findings regarding vocational and pedagogic continuing learning indicate that the teachers handle their learning relatively independently of the schools at which they are employed. However, the findings also imply that there is a clear difference between the two groups: for the floristry teachers a greater level of personal agency was required to access professional learning opportunities. This holds true for vocational learning and is even more pronounced for pedagogic learning.

That vocational learning occurs relatively independently of the schools can be said to show the importance of activities that allow those active in the vocation to share their knowing with VET teachers (e.g., Andersson & Köpsén, 2018). As Billett (2014) notes, in vocations, ‘learning arises through processes of observation, imitation and practice that comprise everyday work activities’ (p. 887). This can be said to explain why – for example, – visiting students during their work-based training provides VET teachers with important input as they strive to keep pace with developments in their vocational field. The teachers talk about their site-based communication with colleagues as an important source of
inspiration in their daily vocational learning, and as a way to gain perspective on one’s own teaching practice, thereby pointing to the benefits of working with others, in line with Swedish education guidelines regarding assessment (Skolverket, 2018).

In terms of continuing professional learning in relation both to their vocational field and to pedagogy, the teachers perceived the more formal continuing professional learning opportunities provided by their employers to be of limited use. The focus of their professional learning is not on employer-provided traditional formal continuing education and training, and this is also indicated by the role they assigned to personal interest and agency. On the contrary, it seems that in the two VET teacher groups, the practice traditions – carrying previous sayings, doings and relatings of practices (Mahon, 2017) – are characterised by the lack of involvement of school management. The interviewed teachers did not mention any attempts to alter this status quo.

The main professional learning that surfaced in the research included opportunities associated with the two respective core businesses, adjacent businesses such as product companies, and the national membership organisations. Examples provided by participants suggest that these and other practices mutually influence each other, in line with the ecologies of practices theory (Kemmis et al., 2014). The increased agency of floristry teachers related to their own professional learning compared with hairdressing teachers, can be seen as a consequence of differences regarding their practice traditions. For the hairdressing teachers, continuing professional learning needs were catered for by hair product companies and the hairdressing teacher professional organisation, which decreased the need for them to make their own arrangements.

It should be noted that the hair product companies likely exert implicit influence over the subject matter of hairdressing classes; to benefit their financial interests. The professional organisation is well-situated within the hairdressing business and hence is likely subject to the influence of product companies – and their financial interest – as well. Thus, vested interests³ can be said to play a role in the interconnected webs of practices of the hairdressing teachers, exerting an influence on them. In the interconnected webs of practices of the floristry teachers, business interests appear less organised and hence potentially less influential. Nonetheless, the overall situation can be said to illustrate the ‘contestation, struggle or tension’ (Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves, & Choy, 2017a, p. 14) inherent in any site.

Returning to the research question this article addresses, What continuing professional learning do experienced floristry and hairdressing teachers undertake in relation to their vocational field and to pedagogy, it can, on the one hand, be stated that the VET teachers in this research received limited organisational support and formal continuing professional learning at their place of work. On the other hand, individual VET teachers who received neither direct support nor meddling were able to have considerable agency to determine the scope and character of their own professional learning. This was most clearly the case for the floristry teachers who faced a choice between no continuing professional learning and organising their own continuing professional learning. This was also the case for the hairdressing teachers who nonetheless had easier access to continuing professional learning opportunities. The findings thus indicate that VET teachers who rely on their own agency, in combination with cooperation among colleagues, have greater influence over their professional learning, albeit potentially subject to vested interests. In other words, VET teachers who rely on themselves
and their colleagues can control their own continuing professional learning at their place of work. However, the initiatives revealed in the findings are predominantly on an individual level.

Notes

1. The concept of knowing is used to ‘cover both practical and theoretical knowledge’ (Polanyi, 2009, p. 7). Polanyi (1966/2009) refers to Gilbert Ryle when making this distinction.
2. The Swedish name of the organisation is Stylist och frisörlärrarförbundet.
3. It is beyond the scope of this article to consider whether the influence of commercial interest is detrimental, as compared to any other potential influence.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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