



# The Mother, the Hairdresser, the Teacher: Exploring Gendered Vocational Teacher Identities in Hairdressing Education

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Received: 21 January 2025 / Accepted: 9 July 2025  
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## Abstract

This article explores how the professional identities of vocational teachers are negotiated within the context of Swedish school-based hairdressing education, emphasising the influence of gender in these processes. Research has shown that vocational teachers navigate between an identity as a teacher and one related to the vocation they teach. However, limited attention has been given to how they are positioned by their students and how they, in turn, position themselves in these interactions. Addressing this gap, the study combines positioning theory with a social constructionist perspective on gender to analyse the positions of vocational teachers in hairdressing education. Such knowledge is beneficial for understanding vocational teachers work and identity in vocational education and training (VET). Based on ethnographic data from Swedish upper secondary schools, three dominant subject positions emerged: the Mother, the Hairdresser, and the Teacher. Gender plays a critical role in these positions, with femininity being reinforced in the roles of the Mother- and the Hairdresser position, while norms of masculinity emerge in the Teacher position, often manifested through control and authority over students. Teachers relate to the positions by aligning with or distancing themselves from them, depending on the discourses available to engage with. They find themselves in a complex situation when the discourses within which available positions are constituted conflict with each other.

**Keywords** Gender · Hairdressing · Ethnography · Femininity · Masculinity · Vocational Teachers · Positioning · VET

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## Introduction

This article aims to examine how the professional identities of vocational teachers are negotiated between vocational students and vocational teachers in Swedish school-based hairdressing education, and how notions of femininities and masculinities influence these processes. The point of departure is a social constructionist perspective on gender and Connell's (2009) theory of gender relations. According to the Swedish curriculum, vocational teachers are to challenge traditional gender patterns. This means that they are supposed to help students develop the ability to critically analyse how masculinity and femininity norms can limit the power of women and men to shape both society and their own lives (Lgy, 2022). At the same time, studies show that masculinity and femininity are reinforced in vocational education and training (VET) (Klope, 2020; Klope & Hedlin, 2023; Ledman et al., 2018, 2021). The difficulties in challenging traditional gender patterns in VET should be understood in relation to the fact that VET programmes are gendered. This means that the programmes are associated with masculine- or feminine-coded qualities, e.g. that construction workers are expected to be strong and physically tough while nurses are expected to be soft and understanding (Hedlin & Åberg, 2013). As a result, the task of challenging gender patterns has proven difficult to achieve (Lappalainen et al., 2012; Ümarik & Aavik, 2020). A deeper understanding of the gendered professional identities, of vocational teachers could help to expand understanding of vocational teachers' work in VET.

Vocational teachers work in the borderland between school and working life (Broberg, 2014; Mårtensson, 2021). Consequently, they have two professional identities, one in their prior occupation (e.g. hairdresser or carpenter) and one as a teacher (Andersson & Köpsén, 2019a, b; cf. Antera, 2023; Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén, 2014; Nylund & Gudmundson, 2017; Tyler & Dymock, 2021). These professional identities are gendered, i.e. impregnated with cultural notions of masculine and feminine. This gendering implies that they are imbued with different societal gendered expectations, e.g. how people are expected to dress and behave, and which qualities and skills are valued and encouraged in different occupations (Connell, 2009). Previous studies emphasise the importance of considering notions of femininities and masculinities when studying teachers' work and professional identities (Acker, 1995; Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007). Moreover, education systems are pivotal in shaping our understanding of gender, but VET has rarely been considered in these contexts (Ümarik & Aavik, 2020), and few studies have addressed gender in the work of vocational teachers (Aavik & Ümarik, 2020; Lappalainen et al., 2012; cf. Ümarik & Aavik, 2020). Most studies that have examined notions of femininities and masculinities in the teaching profession have focussed on primary or lower secondary school (Lappalainen et al., 2012).

While previous studies have examined vocational teachers' learning of professional identities through sociocultural theory, and how vocational teachers themselves describe their professional identities (e.g. Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén, 2014), the present study focuses on how the professional identities of vocational teachers are negotiated between students and teachers in everyday school activities and highlights students' perspectives on vocational teachers. There is limited

research on how vocational teachers are perceived by their students and how they, in turn, relate to the students in school-based VET. Such knowledge is important for understanding the learning of vocational identities in contemporary VET. The study combines positioning theory, where positioning is the discursive process by which individuals relate to normalised ideas and behaviours (Davies & Harré, 1990), with a social constructionist perspective on gender relations (Connell, 2009). This combination enables an analysis of the interactive processes in which gendered professional identities are negotiated.

The study was conducted in Swedish school-based hairdressing VET. Hairdressing is of particular interest as it is the most female-dominated VET programme in Sweden. The study data consists of participant observations of teaching in vocational subjects in two different hairdressing classes (Years 2 and 3), informal conversations, and interviews. The study included 20 students and eight vocational teachers. The article will address the following research questions:

- How are vocational teachers in Upper Secondary Swedish schools positioned in VET for hairdressers and how do those vocational teachers relate to the positions?
- How can the positioning of vocational teachers in VET for hairdressers be understood as gendered processes?

## The Context of the Study

The Swedish school system consists of one year of compulsory preschool class followed by 9 years of compulsory primary school. Then, at the age of 15–16, students choose a three-year upper secondary school programme. There are 18 national three-year programmes, of which 12 are VET programmes and six are university preparatory programmes. In terms of organisation and delivery, VET in Sweden is largely school-based and state-controlled (Panican & Paul, 2019). Most vocational subjects are usually studied at school, but at least 15 weeks of training is workplace-based learning in a salon. The vocational subjects for hairdressing students include vocational theory as well as practical work on mannequin heads and interacting with customers in the school salon. In addition to vocational subjects, students study general upper secondary school subjects (e.g. maths, Swedish and English). Since 2011, it is also possible to choose VET that has a higher proportion of the training in the workplace. However, this model has not been popular among youths, with only three per cent of VET students choosing a course with more workplace-based learning (Björk-Åman et al., 2021). Even though there are supervisors in the workplace, it is the VET teachers who have the main responsibility for students' education in both school-based and workplace-based learning (Andersson & Köpsén, 2014).

As in many other countries VET pathways continue to be associated with “low esteem” (Jørgensen, 2015). This perception has contributed to challenges in the Swedish VET system, including declining enrolment rates, despite a significant demand for VET graduates in the labour market (Panican & Paul, 2019). One strategy to increase the number of students in VET has been to seek to combat gendered choices through policy strategies, comprehensive policies on gender equality and discrimi-

nation, and efforts to challenge gender stereotypes in study and career counselling (Simonsson, 2022). However, despite numerous attempts since the 1970s to reduce gender-based patterns in students' programme choices, these patterns persist. In the case of hairdressing, 94 per cent of students in the hairdressing handicraft programme are women whose parents usually do not have higher education (Skolverket, 2024), and both hairdressing and VET for hairdressers in Sweden are strongly associated with femininity (Klope, 2020; Nordberg, 2005). This is not only because a majority of hairdressers, students and vocational teachers in Sweden are women, but also because the occupation itself is linked to characteristics associated with femininity, such as smiling and looking happy, showing care for customers, and having an interest in beauty (Klope, 2020; Klope & Hedlin, 2023; Nordberg, 2005). These aspects often overshadow the fact that hairdressing is a skilled craft with long historical traditions (cf. Holmes, 2015). To become a qualified hairdresser according to Swedish industry standards, students must work as apprentices for approximately two years after completing their VET programme and pass a journeyman's test (Klope, 2020). The tendency to view hairdressing primarily as a service occupation rather than a craft may contribute to the challenges vocational hairdressing teachers face in being recognised as professional craftspeople (cf. Holmes, 2015). Gendered notions also plays a role here, as craftsmanship associated with feminine characteristics in VET are rarely emphasised as crafts, either in public discourse or in research (cf. Broberg et al., 2022).

Sweden has a shortage of formally educated vocational teachers (Skolverket, 2025). For the time being, they are therefore exempt from the certification requirement that is otherwise mandatory to become permanently employed as a teacher (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Johansson, 2019). In order to qualify for vocational teacher certification in Sweden, one must successfully complete a vocational teacher training programme. A VET teacher with teacher certification has vocational teacher training equivalent to 90 higher education credits. To be eligible for the training, in addition to meeting the general entry requirements to study at university, aspiring teachers must have validated qualified and relevant professional knowledge in the vocational subjects they intend to teach, such as a journeyman's certificate and current and relevant work experience (Johansson, 2019). However, in Sweden, there are no formal requirements for VET teachers to maintain competence in their initial occupation (Andersson & Köpsén, 2019a, b). In addition to teaching their vocational subjects, VET teachers are also expected to adhere to the professional code of ethics (Lärarnas Yrkesetiska Råd, 2001). According to these ethical guidelines, VET teachers have a responsibility not only for students' learning but also for their personal development. They are also supposed to always treat students with respect for their person and integrity and to protect students from harm, insult and harassment. Teachers should also endeavour to maintain and foster good relationships with students and be responsive to their views.

## Vocational Teacher Identities and Gender

Vocational teachers have two professional identities, one in their previous vocation and one as a teacher (Andersson & Köpsén, 2019a, b; cf. Antera, 2023; Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén, 2014; Nylund & Gudmundson, 2017; Tyler & Dymock, 2021). Teachers with a weak relationship to their previous occupation tend to have stronger teacher identities than teachers who strongly identify with their prior vocation (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014). Teachers who strongly identify with their previous vocation may instead find it difficult to identify as teachers (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014), which may influence how students perceive VET teachers. How vocational teachers identify professionally also plays a significant role in what they value as important knowledge in VET (Nylund & Gudmundson, 2017). Studies show that students' learning in VET involves socialisation into a vocational culture, and that vocational teachers emphasise educating students to cope with working life and the vocational culture they are being prepared to take part in (Colley et al., 2003; Hedlin & Åberg, 2013; Köpsén, 2014; Nylund & Gudmundson, 2017). This vocational culture is commonly associated with masculinity and femininity norms, such as a construction worker being expected to be physically tough, while a nursing assistant is expected to be empathetic (Hedlin & Åberg, 2013). Fejes and Köpsén (2014) highlight teacher training as important for how vocational teachers identify as teachers and as something which gives them credibility in the teaching community, but vocational teachers in masculine-coded programmes tend to regard teacher training as something relatively unnecessary (Berglund, 2009; Berner, 1989; Nylund & Gudmundson, 2017). A common perception among vocational teachers in VET programmes associated with masculine characteristics is that it is enough to use "common sense", and vocational teachers regard themselves more as supervisors than as vocational teachers (cf. Fejes & Köpsén, 2014). This perspective can be attributed in part to the fact that vocational teachers often gain their subject knowledge from working life (e.g. vehicle mechanics, hairdressers), in contrast to teachers who teach general upper secondary school subjects, who come from an academic knowledge tradition. Thus, for vocational teachers, teacher training can be seen as a movement between social strata. At the same time, it is important to have up-to-date vocational knowledge in the vocational subjects they teach, something that many vocational teachers with (Andersson & Köpsén, 2019a, b; Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén & Andersson, 2017). Maintaining industry knowledge is important for vocational teachers' professionalism and dual professional identity (Andersson & Köpsén, 2018, 2019a, b; Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén & Andersson, 2017; Tyler & Dymock, 2021).

Vocational teachers often have what might be termed a working class background in terms of their prior occupations not requiring higher education. This is reflected in the student composition of vocational programmes (Berner, 1989; cf. Skolverket, 2024). Berner (1989, 2010) notes that vocational teachers in Industrial Technology Programme, despite many years of teaching, still identify more strongly with their former occupation, which can be understood in terms of a disidentification with the middle-class background of the teaching profession (cf. Skeggs, 2000). In this context, studies show that teaching in VET also tends to reproduce traditional class patterns and norms (Panican & Paul, 2019), i.e. the unwritten rules and expectations that

exist within a particular social class (e.g. Ambjörnsson, 2004; Skeggs, 1995; Willis, 1977). However, the importance of encouraging students to adapt their behaviour to the workplace should be understood in the context of VET teachers emphasising that they are more patient than workplace supervisors (Berner, 2010). By reconstructing their experiences from working life, VET teachers link school and workplace learning in their teaching (Berner, 2010).

Finnish studies have examined the work of vocational teachers and gender (Lahelma et al., 2014; Lappalainen et al., 2012). Lappalainen et al. (2012) interviewed VET teachers about their understanding of the meaning of femininity and masculinity in their work. The researchers identified how inequality between male and female vocational teachers is maintained in everyday activities in VET. Both male and female teachers express ideas about the gender of teachers being unimportant, while notions of gender neutrality are challenged by cultural stereotypes. For example, female teachers are described as excessively meticulous and dutiful, but not in a positive sense. Male teachers, on the other hand, are described as straightforward and stubborn in a positive sense. To conclude, different aspects of notions of femininity and masculinity are highlighted as existing in the vocational teaching profession, where both gender-neutral policies and gendered practices coexist. Teachers adopt the dominant idea of gender neutrality, while at the same time as reproducing dichotomous and hierarchical perceptions of men and women (Lappalainen et al., 2012). In a follow-up study, Lahelma et al. (2014) show that teachers' work in VET involves negotiation between "teaching" and "care", as teachers see care as something extra they do in addition to their work and both male and female teachers are ambivalent about caring duties in their work. All teachers in the study would prefer to purely "teach" in their profession rather than engage in caring. The researchers identify differences between the Health and Social Services (HSS) programme, traditionally associated with women, and the Transport and Technology (TT) programme, traditionally associated with men. In HSS, caring about students is discussed as a gendered task among teachers, and female teachers use the mother as a metaphor for parts of vocational teachers' work, where they are expected to take responsibility for not only preventing young people from becoming marginalised, but also preparing them to mature and care for others. Male teachers in HSS, on the other hand, can distance themselves from the expectation to be caring and mothering, since they describe these as inherently female characteristics. In TT, teachers do not talk about caring as a gendered task. Instead, both male and female teachers regard caring as a responsibility for teachers (Lahelma et al., 2014).

Studies from Estonia show that stakeholders in VET, such as headteachers and vocational teachers, perpetuate the gender order (Aavik & Ümarik, 2020; Ümarik & Aavik, 2020). The fact that VET reproduces traditional gender patterns is not seen as problematic by stakeholders (Ümarik & Aavik, 2020). Stakeholders' narratives reproduced gender stereotypes by attributing different abilities and interests to women and men. Traditional notions of men as breadwinners are used to legitimise that men's professions are better paid (Ümarik & Aavik, 2020). The superiority of male teachers is confirmed by male vocational teachers being constituted within an exceptional male teacher discourse (Aavik & Ümarik, 2020). Men are described as valuable role models for students, for example as strict authorities, or as active

and goal-orientated. Unlike female teachers, men are described in positive terms as opposed to administration and bureaucracy. Male vocational teachers are assumed to bring a “male perspective” to VET, such as being concrete and rational, and providing new perspectives. Men are also considered deserving of a higher salary. The discourse of the exceptional male teacher relates to wider discourses of education being coded as feminine. Within this discourse, female teachers and the feminine coding of education are presented as the cause of boys’ school failure (Aavik & Ümarik, 2020).

## Theoretical Perspectives on Gender and Positioning

The study is based on a social constructionist perspective on gender, which is appropriate when the focus of the study is on how gender is performed. This is an important difference from many studies that take an essentialist perspective on teachers’ work and gender (Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007). Studies with an essentialist approach to gender explain differences between male and female teachers based on the idea that these differences are built on internal characteristics related to biological sex (Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007). This is not the focus of this study, which looks at gendered meanings in processes and relations (Connell, 2009; Sabbe & Aelterman, 2007). From this perspective, masculinity and femininity do not refer to biological sex, but to a multidimensional social construction involving power, hierarchies and relationships between people based on culturally time-bound notions of gender (Connell, 2009). Connell describes gender as “a matter of social relations within which individuals and groups act” (Connell 2002, p. 9). By gendering, Connell (2009) refers to the categorisation of characteristics, tasks, occupations, colours, clothing, etc. as feminine or masculine. The division into male and female forms an overarching pattern, a gender order that regulates socially unequal and/or gender-unequal relationships. Through social norms, we occupy and are assigned a place in a gender order in which masculinity is valued more highly than femininity. Thus, a central aspect of masculinities and femininities is supporting and affirming the gender order. Masculinity and femininity can also interact with other categories, such as age, ethnicity and class (Connell, 2009).

The social constructionistic perspective on gender (Connell, 2009) is combined with the positioning theory of Davies and Harré (1990). Positioning refers to the discursive process by which individuals relate themselves and others to normalised ideas and behaviours. Every discursive practice possesses a constitutive power that lies in the positions that are created and offered. A position can be understood as a place in a discourse that contains both ideas and a place for people within a structure, where a subject can position itself and be positioned by others (Davies & Harré, 1990). When someone takes up a position, it results in them seeing the world from that perspective in terms of what metaphors, storylines and concepts are relevant within that particular discursive practice. However, being positioned by someone else does not mean being forced to accept the position. It is possible to distance oneself and choose another position because there are many, often conflicting, discursive practices that a person can engage in. When a person takes up a position, it means that they view the world from that perspective with the metaphors, narratives and con-

cepts that are central to the discourse in which they engage. Davies and Harré (1990) exemplify how a heterosexual romantic love discourse provides two complementary subject positions: a male hero/prince with agency who is about to perform a heroic deed to save a princess. The princess, in turn, is depicted as a victim and dependent on the hero to come and rescue her. In relation to the present study, this means that the discourses that create different narratives about teachers' work in VET also provide different positions that students and teachers relate to. The positions are not static or tied to a particular teacher (Davies & Harré, 1990). This means that the same teacher can take up or reject the same position. Teachers relate to the positions by taking up and distancing themselves from them depending on the discourses available to engage with. For example, a hairdresser's work is constituted within a capitalist discourse of service (cf. Nordberg, 2005), while a teacher's work is constituted within an educational discourse. The positions and discourses also affect what positions are possible for the student to take up.

## Researching Gendered Teacher Positions in VET

The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two Swedish upper secondary schools located in similar mid-sized cities in southern Sweden (referred to as School A and School B). An ethnographic approach was chosen as it is well suited for studying gendered processes and negotiations in everyday school activities (Ambjörnsson, 2004). For about six months, the researcher followed hairdressing students in Years 2 and 3 and their vocational teachers at two upper secondary schools. First year students were excluded due to their limited experience of hairdressing. For example, they did not yet work with customers or participate in workplace-based learning during their first year. Both schools have an extensive history of hairdressing VET and a good reputation in the educational system and the Swedish hairdressing industry. Starting in 2021, 71.1 per cent of students in Sweden graduated from the Handicraft programme within three years (Skolverket, 2024). In both School A and School B, some students dropped out during the first year. However, those who continued into Year 2 completed the programme. Despite this, about one third of graduates did not work as hairdressers after finishing upper secondary education, a number that aligns with national statistics (Klope, 2020).

The two classes together consisted of 25 students. All students in the classes followed were invited to participate in the study. 20 out of 25 students participated, eight in school A and twelve in school B. The students who decided not to participate were not included in any field notes. 19 of the participating students identified as female and one as male. None of them identified in any other way. The students were between 17 and 20 years old. A total of eight vocational teachers participated, ranging in age from approximately 40 to 55. They were well-educated hairdressers with journeyman and/or master qualifications and vocational teachers with teacher training and qualified teachers. They had worked as teachers between five and approximately 30 years. The vocational teachers identified as women.

Data consists of participant observations, informal conversations with teachers and students and individual interviews with 20 students, and a focus group inter-

view was conducted with five of the vocational teachers (Wibeck, 2010). During the fieldwork, it was found that the students ascribed different subject positions to the vocational teachers in different contexts, for example, sometimes the teachers were recognised as hairdressers when students asked for advice on how to treat their own hair. In this article, the focus is on these positions, the role of gender in the positions, and how the teachers relate to them. The researcher mainly observed the teaching of vocational subjects, but also observed everyday activities such as breaks between lessons. The observations lasted from about 30 min to whole school days. During the observations, various forms of notes were taken depending on the activities in the classroom. Sometimes they were jottings intended to serve as a memory aid when writing detailed fieldnotes after the observation, and sometimes they were more elaborated field notes. The field notes included methodological observation notes (describing what happens without making too many interpretations), and methodological notes (reminders or instructions to oneself for critical self-reflection, for example) (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973).

The interviews with students were semi-structured (Bryman, 2018), including questions about choice of study programme, how students viewed their vocational teachers, their education, the hairdressing vocation and future ambitions. In the focus group interview with teachers, which was conducted after all observations and student interviews, questions were asked about how the teachers reasoned about positions identified by the researcher during the fieldwork and in the student interviews. The focus group interview gave the teachers the opportunity to immerse themselves in and reflect on each other's reasoning (Wibeck, 2010). The vocational teachers were not interviewed individually, as during the fieldwork there were many opportunities to speak individually and ask the teachers questions about their work. The interviews lasted about an hour and were conducted in Swedish. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in their entirety, starting with a verbatim transcription in which all pauses and small words were written out (e.g. eh, ah). Emphasis was marked in bold and brackets [ ] were used to mark sounds such as laughter and sighs. The quotes in the text have been translated into English and edited to improve readability.

The study was conducted in accordance with the Swedish Research Council's guidelines (2017) on good research practice. Before they agreed to take part in the study, participants were informed in writing and orally about the purpose and design of the study and that they could end their participation at any time. All names of participants, locations and schools have been anonymised. The study data has been kept confidential.

The analysis was conducted thematically according to the six steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step involved familiarising oneself with the data, transcribing the material and jotting down initial ideas. This work started already during the fieldwork, where it was noted that teachers' interactions with the students in the classroom could be regarded as different roles or positions, which varied depending on the context and situations. During the transcription of the interviews prior to the focus group interview with the teachers, it was also noted that there were several positions in the material. No theoretical perspective was chosen in this step.

In step two, the following preliminary research question was formulated: In what positions are the vocational teachers positioned within VET for hairdressers? The

material was then read repeatedly to systematically search for patterns. Seven different positions were identified and coded: the VET teacher as a friend, a colleague, a teacher, a boss, a role model, a mother, and a personal hairdresser. In step three, the creation of themes began. In addition to identifying the positions, there was also analysis of how these were constructed in the material. The positions were interpreted in this step with the help of positioning theory. It was found that gender theory could contribute to an in-depth analysis.

In the next step, the research questions were reformulated to include gender and how the teachers related to the different positions. All material was re-read with these new research questions in mind. The newly formed themes were reviewed and checked to ensure they worked in relation to the coded extracts. In step five, three themes were named: *The Mother*, *The Hairdresser*, *The Teacher*. These themes encompass three different positions and describe how teachers are positioned, how they relate to these positions and how the positioning of teachers can be understood as a gendered process. It should be emphasised that that training and teaching was very similar in School A and School B. All teachers moved between the different positions, and no differences between the schools could be found in the interviews with the students. As the study is qualitative, it is important to highlight and describe the positions, not to count how often the teachers were positioned in the different positions or used them (cf. Högberg et al., 2020). The only difference that emerged as significant was the spatial arrangement, and that teachers at school A referred to themselves as colleagues in their teaching. This will be described in the results.

In the final step, relevant quotes and field notes were selected and an analytic narrative was produced to highlight each theme in order to make arguments in relation to the research questions. The following three sections present the themes and results of the study.

## The Mother

The first position identified is the Mother. In this position, the vocational teacher is seen as someone who cares, encourages and tries to cheer up the students if they are feeling down. A common practice is for teachers in the Mother position to address students as “sweetie”, or “dear”, like a mother addressing her child. The Mother position includes things that go beyond the teacher’s traditional teaching role. This position can be expressed by vocational teachers sharing personal stories about their lives that let students know aspects of the teachers’ private lives, such as their family relationships, where they live and what food they like. Several of the vocational teachers at the schools invite their students to their homes on special occasions, such as before Christmas and summer break. This is an acceptable standard of practice in both schools, and is appreciated by both teachers and students.

Mandy, a 17-year-old student who moved far away from her parents to train as a hairdresser, often positions the vocational teachers in the Mother position. During the interview, she says that hairdressing students have a close relationship with vocational teachers. As an example, she describes that the teachers call her if she is sick to offer their help and show that they care about her well-being. This is not something

that teachers are expected to do by formal requirements, but something that some of the vocational teachers in both schools does on their own initiative.

The teachers in VET for hairdressing often emphasises aspects such as the importance of cleaning, being thorough and having a service mindset in relation to not only the customer but also potential employers, aspects that are relevant to the hairdressing occupation (Klope, 2020). Many students perceive these as tough demands from both teachers and supervisors. To put the students in a good mood and balance the tough demands, Mandy describes how the VET teachers joke around with the students, for example by playfully spraying water on them in the salon: “Even though it has to be strict and almost perfect [at school], they can play around and have fun, so you don’t have to let go of your childish side, you can still be as playful.”

When asked why it is that vocational teachers seem to have such a close relationship with the students, VET teacher Ninni, who has been working as a teacher for ten years, replies that it varies from teacher to teacher, but that she is a teacher who “[...] jokes and plays with the students to inspire and keep them happy. There is so much boredom and crap. They need something that can bring them joy. If you have fun, you learn.” In this way, she links the Mother position with teaching, where students expect to not only be encouraged, but also learn better. The nurturing and supportive approach is also evident in many interactions with students. Vocational teachers often talk about the importance of keeping their tools organised and bringing them to class, but several instances of students forgetting things were seen during the fieldwork. The situation below illustrates an example of the teacher Ninni taking up the Mother position:

Ninni is teaching cutting techniques in the school salon. She explains the different effects of different ways of cutting hair. The students watch her. Some focus their attention intensely on her. Others are looking elsewhere. Ninni jokes with them while she explains the techniques. Karin [student] forgot her scissors. Once Ninni has finished the demonstration, Karin walks up to her, tilts her head, smiles and says in a pleading voice:

**Karin** [student]: Ninni, I forgot my scissors. Can I borrow yours?

**Ninni** [teacher]: Yes, you can borrow mine, but it will cost you three hugs and some chocolate.

[Karin laughs]

Ninni hands over the scissors and gives Karin a tender hug.

(Field note School A, Year 2, Ninni teaching experience ten years)

In the situation, the student Karin positions the teacher Ninni in the Mother position. Ninni takes up the position by gently and jokingly replying that Karin can borrow the scissors if Ninni gets three hugs and some chocolate. Ninni loves chocolate and her students are very aware of it, as it is something Ninni often emphasises when inter-

acting with her students. In the example Karin, the student, acts in line with femininity norms for a girl, through her smile, using pleading voice and tilting her head to the side. Ninni, the teacher, takes up the Mother position by asking for and giving a hug, like a mother wanting to hug her child and acting in line with the femininity norms of motherhood. The Mother position includes mothering, which Johansson (2014) describes as synonymous with care practices that do not need to be linked to one's "own" children but can also relate to relationships between children and adults (cf. Holm, 1993). Historically, teachers working with younger children in particular have faced expectations to act as mothers and show care for the children (Tallberg Broman, 2002). The example shows that mothering is not limited to female teachers working with younger children, but also includes the work of female hairdressing teachers in upper secondary schools (cf. Lahelma et al., 2014). No one described this type of performance as problematic, although it could be considered inappropriate given the student's high degree of dependence on the teacher.

However, the vocational teachers display ambivalence in their engagement with the Mother position. Several of the vocational teachers often distanced themselves from the position. One example is the teacher Molly. Molly has worked as a vocational teacher for almost 30 years and describes herself as a teacher who thinks it is important that students learn to take responsibility and act as professional hairdressers. During the fieldwork, Molly mainly teaches in Year 3. She does not address students as "sweetie" or "dear". Several students describe her as strict and stubborn. Molly says that students have approached the headteacher to complain about her: "They [the students] find it hard to deal with customers and well, I'm not the happy, cheerful sort, you know." The happy, cheerful teacher Molly refers to can be interpreted as an aspect of the Mother position, which also includes joking with students to brighten their spirits. The Mother position interplays with an expected gender performance for female hairdressing teachers, which Molly distances herself from, as illustrated in the example below:

The lesson has just started and Molly [teacher] is reviewing the material. Several of the students do not have their papers with them. "Can't you hold onto the papers instead. Otherwise, we always lose them," says Andrea. Isabelle [student] laughs. The teacher Molly laughs and answers with an ironic tone: "Oh, you mean like in primary school?" (Field note, School B, Year 3, Molly teaching experience 30 years).

In the above situation, the student Andrea positions the teacher Molly in the Mother position by asking her to take care of their papers. However, Molly does not take up the position. She distances herself from the Mother position when she replies that a teacher taking care of students' papers between lessons is something that belongs in primary school, not a VET programme with students who will be graduating soon. Even though Molly tries to distance herself from the Mother position, there are times when she takes it up, albeit reluctantly:

It is noisy in the classroom. Molly [teacher] starts talking.

**Karen** [student]: Shh! Shh! [Turns to the class, Looking irritated.]

**Molly** [teacher]: What did you say?

**Karen** [student]: I just said “shh” to get them to quiet down.

**Molly** [teacher]: Aha. Okay.

Molly continues talking about the assignment.

**Karen** [student]: Shh! Shh! [louder now]

The classroom quiets down.

**Molly** passes out new papers and says: “Are you filling in the new paper you got?”

**Andrea** [student] calls out: “Molly! Can Stina [student] borrow the yellow pen?”

Molly gives her a pen and says, “I’ve decided that I need to have a box of pens with me, since none of you ever bring a pen along.” The tone is slightly joking, and one corner of her mouth is pulled up in a smile. (Field note, School B, Year 3 Molly teaching experience 30 years)

In this situation, students Andrea and Stina position Molly in the Mother position by asking to borrow her pen. This time, Molly takes up the position by giving the students a pen, even though she often distances herself from the Mother position. This is interpreted as meaning that the students’ repeated claims to position her in the Mother position are associated with a risk of a social cost for female teachers who do not take it up. The ideal of good mothering is linked to cultural definitions of women as nurturing, loving and self-sacrificing (Connell, 2009). Widding (2013) describes the Mother’s Responsibility Discourse. It refers to both the mothers of students and female teachers who are expected to show great commitment and care for the students. Although all teachers, regardless of gender, are required to show care for students, Widding shows that there are higher demands on female than male teachers to show care for their students (cf. Lahelma et al., 2014). For Molly, distancing herself from the Mother position means breaking with the prevailing expectations of female vocational teachers to act as a caring mother. When she distances herself from the position, there is a risk of her being interpreted as being a hard and strict teacher, in line with masculinity norms (Connell, 2009). The fact that the students have complained about her to the headteacher as being hard and strict can thus be understood as her breaking with normative feminine ideals. In addition, she runs the risk of being regarded as grumpy and unfeminine when, as she puts it, she works to “nurture students to become professional hairdressers” instead of joking with them, asking for a hug, or addressing them as “sweetie”.

## The Hairdresser

The second position identified is the Hairdresser. This position is centred around hairdressing as a vocation. The Hairdresser position also interplays with femininity norms, e.g. being cheerful and friendly, and interested in make-up and hair (Connell, 2009). In both schools, students and vocational teachers underscore that vocational teachers are different than teachers of general school subjects. The student Sonja says:

**Sonja:** They're different from regular teachers, like those who teach Swedish. They act a bit like hairdressers. I've never met any other teacher like Margareta [hairdressing teacher]. She curls her hair every morning, wears a dress and heels, and **smiles**. Or Marita, with her scarves and fancy clothes and heels; and Miranda... They don't look like teachers. They look good. They dress trendy and keep up with the latest fashion. The other teachers are more ordinary. (Interview, Year 2, School B)

Sonja positions the hairdressing teachers in the Hairdresser position created by feminine connotations. The hairdressing teachers appear to care about their appearance with styled hairstyles, nice clothes, high heels, and not least a smile. The Hairdresser position is described as a cheerful, youthful woman who “keeps up with the latest fashion”, unlike other teachers who are more “ordinary”. General subject teachers can thus be implicitly understood as being uninterested in their appearance, smiling less and looking less happy— aspects that interplay with masculinity norms (Connell, 2009).

Miranda, a vocational teacher with 20 years of teaching experience, also describes vocational teachers as different from general subject teachers. She explains the pleasant atmosphere at the school by saying that “... It's because there are so many vocational teachers [at the school]. We have a different way of being than the core subject teachers.” In the group interview, vocational teachers are asked to comment on the fact that a common description given by both teachers and students at the schools are that they stand out as being stylish and pleasant. The teachers respond:

**Margreth:** Yes, that really is true [laughs].

**Megan:** Pelle [construction teacher] said something like that today: “You are all so happy all the time!”

**Molly:** Yes, that is true! There are always some who say, “Why are you over-represented when it comes to exercise, participation in activities, always nice at parties, always the last to leave the after work get-togethers, and why do you always have so much fun when you're sitting having lunch?” It must have something to do with our positivity, our tendency to get on with things, our habit of dressing up. (Focus group interview, School B, Molly with 30 years of teaching experience, Margareth, 15 years, Megan 12 years).

In the quote, the teachers take up the Hairdresser position. The Hairdresser position appears as a desirable femininity where the hairdresser teachers appear as stylish, active, happy and positive. This can be understood in relation to the fact that hairdressing involves aesthetic labour, i.e. presenting an image that appeals to the customer (Warhurst et al., 2000). However, the longer they have worked as teachers, the further away from the Hairdresser position they are placed by the students. The student Pernilla explains:

**Pernilla:** They've been hairdressers, but that was a long time ago. They need to get updated. They don't have current vocational knowledge. We [the students] are more up to date than they are! (Interview, Year 3, School B).

Pernilla stresses that the hairdressing teachers have indeed been hairdressers, but she does not position them in the Hairdresser position. She refers to the fact that the teachers' vocational knowledge is outdated and that the students have more up-to-date professional knowledge. It is interpreted that the students do not consider it possible for the vocational teachers to maintain the hairdressing profession's connection to fashion and trends, where new cutting and colouring techniques are constantly being developed. During the focus group interview, the vocational teachers stated that, when going for workplace learning, the students did not want to be with a hairdresser who is an "old lady", and instead wanted to be with "someone who is young and looks good". At the same time, the teachers claimed that young hairdressers do not always have the solid vocational knowledge that older hairdressers have. None of the teachers described a situation where they lacked up-to-date vocational knowledge in hairdressing. They often presented themselves as knowledgeable hairdressers. In both schools, teachers often participated in professional development for hairdressers.

At School A, the vocational teachers referred to themselves as colleagues of the students and spoke to the students in terms of "We hairdressers". In the marketing material at School A, a student speaks positively of the fact that the VET teachers at the school are like colleagues. When asked if the student Lucas sees the teachers as hairdressers, he answers convincingly:

**Lucas:** Yes, I think so! Maybe not as colleagues, but it's not like how it was in compulsory school: "Ugh, not the teacher...!" The contact with teachers here is different. I know I called my teacher and said: "Hey, thanks for giving me a ride here to work... but I forgot my wallet at school" [laughs] (Interview, Year 3, School A).

However, when it comes to the Hairdresser position, there is a difference between the schools. At School B, the vocational teachers did not describe themselves as colleagues of the students. They distanced themselves from the Hairdresser position by referring to hairdressers as "the hairdressers", "the supervisors" or "those out in the real world" when talking about hairdressers in their teaching. This difference could also be seen in the spatial arrangements of the schools. At School A, the salon was unlocked and the students passed through it to reach the teachers' offices. The door to

the teachers' offices was ajar or wide open if they were present. At School A, students were often in the salon when they were not having class and would come in and ask the teachers about various issues, both school-related activities and issues related to the work that many students did in the salons in their free time. On one occasion, a student who was clearly hungover came in and sat down at the teachers' lunch table in the office area to drink some water and take a painkiller. The teachers then joked and laughed with the students as if they were colleagues: "Are you thirsty today?" "Were you out partying last night?"

At School B, the teachers' offices were just outside the hairdressing department. The door to the teachers' office area was locked, even when the teachers were there. If students at School B wanted to talk to the teachers, they knocked on the door and waited for the teachers to let them in. The students never stayed there for long periods of time. On a window that looked out onto the corridor, the teachers had taped up paper so that the students could not see whether they were in there. The door to the school's salon was always locked when there was no teaching session going on in the salon. In this way, hairdressing teachers at School A also took up the Hairdresser position spatially, while the hairdressing teachers at School B did not.

## The Teacher

The third position identified is the Teacher. The Teacher position is diametrically opposed to the Hairdresser position, and it is difficult to link these two subject positions together. For example, the teacher Ninni (10 years of teaching experience, School A), invites a young woman who works as a hairdresser to talk to the students about what it means to be a hairdresser. Before the class, the teacher explains to me: "You know, she's young, so they'll listen to her better. I know all that stuff too, but to them, I'm always a teacher." This is interpreted as Ninni responding to the students positioning her as a teacher by taking up the Teacher position and allowing a young hairdresser to take up the Hairdresser position, even though she is also familiar with what the hairdresser will be talking about. Age appears here as a favourable category for positioning as a teacher, but a limiting one for positioning as a hairdresser. When the young hairdresser lectures to the students, the central theme is how hard work and subordination in the vocational hierarchy are prerequisites for becoming a successful hairdresser, something that Ninni says the students will not "listen" if she is the one who tells them this. However, none of the teachers say that they would leave teaching to become a hairdresser. When I asked Ninni if she felt like a hairdresser, she replied "No, I don't. I don't want to go back to being a hairdresser and being a slave to the customer."

During the fieldwork, vocational teachers repeatedly describe frustration that students do not work and practice enough. Vocational teacher Molly says, "They don't understand how long it takes to train to become skilled (...) I know what they need to do, and I tell them, but they go home instead of practising". When the teachers emphasise the importance of practising, keeping things tidy and organised, and doing what they know is necessary to become well-trained hairdressers, the students

describe this as the teachers trying to control and discipline them. When asked if the VET teachers are hairdressers, the student Petronella laughs and says:

**Petronella:** They're teachers, not hairdressers. They say we're hairdresser colleagues, but— it's awful to say— we're not. No, I don't think we are.

**Interviewer:** Why don't you think they are?

**Petronella:** Maybe they're hairdressing teachers. Not regular hairdressers. It just doesn't feel like they have the capacity to work out there in a salon.

**Interviewer:** Really?

**Petronella:** No, I can't even image it!

**Interviewer:** If you think of a hairdressing teacher and another teacher, like a maths teacher, is there any difference between them?

**Petronella:** Only that they teach different subjects. Otherwise, there's no difference. Both want power; both want to be in charge. School is a world of its own. No one can argue with that. It's just the way it is.

**Interviewer:** In what way is a school a world of its own?

**Petronella:** They have their strange ideas. They have their own way of doing things. According to them, you're not allowed to disagree with anything. And they have a need to dictate things and be in control, so they become teachers. Then they're a bit more "hm hm hm hm. I'm posh!" [Swedish "fin i kanten"] (high, squeaky voice).

**Interviewer:** Where do you think this need to dictate things and be in control comes from?

**Petronella:** It's from the olden days. Back then, the teacher had all the control in the classroom. They stood there at the front with a big pointer that they used to rap people on the knuckles, more or less. (Interview, Year 2, School A)

The vocational teacher is here placed in a femininity that is devalued by describing the vocational teacher in an exaggeratedly high and squeaky voice as claiming to be "posh". In this context, "posh" means to make oneself conspicuous and to behave pretentiously and fastidiously, which has connotations of class (Ambjörnsson, 2004). The previous occupation, in this case hairdresser, is a vocation that does not require an academic education. When the hairdresser trains to become a teacher, it implies a claim to move between different social classes. Petronella's ridiculing of the teacher can thus be understood as ridiculing of the vocational teacher's claim to social movement. The reasoning is similar to the way in which caricatures of teachers

were spread in the early days of primary school's existence— caricatures that called into question the teachers' *bildung* (Persson, 2010). *Bildung* refers to knowledge that is linked to humanism, developing the whole person and his or her character (Sanderse, 2021). Unlike the educated bourgeoisie, who lived a life of high material standards and social prestige expressed through school and university education, primary school teachers came from humbler backgrounds and had a short education. They were portrayed as vain upstarts who tried to hide the fact that they were not educated enough by using “borrowed feathers” (p 2), and were described as trying to take pride in something they had not earned (Persson, 2010). The contradictions between the Hairdresser and Teacher positions can be understood as the difficulty of reconciling two stereotypical representations (Hall, 1997). In the Teacher position, the vocational teacher is portrayed as being power hungry and attempting to be posh. In this discourse, there is no room for the cheerful, pleasant and trendy femininity that is portrayed in the Hairdresser position. Petronella describes it as teachers not having “the capacity to work out there in a salon”.

In the latter part of the quote, Petronella says that teachers want to dictate things and be in control, which she links to “the olden days” when teachers used physical punishment on the children, something that has been banned in Swedish schools since 1958. This reasoning can be linked to a historical discourse in which male teachers gained more power and respect through physical violence (Hedlin, 2013). The Teacher position creates a different hierarchical order between teacher and student than in the Mother position and the Hairdresser position. In the Teacher position, the vocational teacher acts in accordance with traditional masculinity norms (Connell, 2009), such as being assertive, taking up space and dominating others. Petronella's rejection of the vocational teacher in the Teacher position can be understood in relation to the fact that the teachers are women who are expected to subordinate themselves, and not claim space, as dictated by femininity norms. They are not expected to take a leading, controlling position associated with masculinity. The emphasis on discipline and punctuality, where students are expected to submit to and obey the teacher, can also be linked to historical discourses in which working-class children were to be brought up to behave, be obedient, work hard and be orderly, where primary school teachers of that era (often women with a bourgeois background) were central to the social control of children (Florin, 1999).

## Discussion

This study has identified three dominant positions negotiated between vocational students and vocational teachers in hairdressing education: (1) the Mother (2) the Hairdresser and (3) the Teacher. Gender, i.e. notions of femininities and masculinities, plays a role in all positions. In the position of Mother and Hairdresser, femininity norms are reinforced—the Mother through the femininity norms of motherhood and the Hairdresser by being associated with aesthetic labour (Warhurst et al., 2000). In the Teacher position, masculinity norms emerge in the form of dominating students.

Previous studies have shown that vocational teachers cross boundaries and negotiate identities between the previous vocation and the teaching profession (cf. Antera,

2023; Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén, 2014). This study adds knowledge to the field by showing how vocational teachers' positions are negotiated between students and vocational teachers in VET, and how positions contain gendered expectations within a vocational education associated with femininity. According to Acker (1995), caring activities are one of the cultural scripts regarded as appropriate for female teachers to adopt. In particular, teachers in feminine-coded VET face expectations to show care for students (Lappalainen et al., 2012), in line with the Mother position. The mother as a metaphor in VET has referred to the need to look after and nurture students, a form of monitoring and control (Lappalainen et al., 2012). This position is not limited to feminine-coded education. In masculine-coded industrial education, Berner (1989) describes the school-oriented teacher as a father figure and a professional role model for the students. The school-oriented teacher's identity rests not primarily on the proximity to the workshop, but rather on an ability to impart knowledge to students who are less motivated. The Mother position can thus be understood as a pedagogical tool that vocational teachers use to motivate students. In the Mother position, traditional power and dominance relationships between teacher and student are reduced. The Mother position is instead used as a form of benevolent government (cf. Bartholdsson, 2007), with the students' best interests in mind, as when teacher Ninni describes cheering students up to enable them to learn better. From a gender theory perspective, the position is problematic. When female teachers distance themselves from the Mother position, they risk being seen as bad women who reject children's need for care. As Skeggs (1995) points out, mothering in teaching can foster feelings of never doing enough and being good enough. Thus, the Mother position could potentially contribute to feelings of inadequacy and exhaustion in teachers. In addition, gender-specific demands are placed on teachers who try to distance themselves from the Mother position, as illustrated by the example of Molly, who struggles with students seeing her as strict and grumpy.

The Hairdresser position is seen as a desirable femininity for the vocational teachers, while its strong association with youth and contemporary trends can act as a limiting discourse, making it difficult for older teachers to be positioned as hairdressers by students (cf. Davies & Harré, 1990). The Teacher position and the Hairdresser position do not fit within the same discourse. The hairdresser is presented as subordinate to the customer, accommodating and cheerful, while the teacher is presented as controlling and dominant in accordance with masculinity norms (Connell, 2009). In this context, an interplay exists between gender and class in terms of educational backgrounds. A significant proportion of both students and teachers in VET have non-academic backgrounds (cf. Skolverket, 2024). When the student Petronella describes how teachers want to dictate things and be in control, it is reminiscent of how working class girls in the Childcare and Recreation Programme distance themselves from girls in the middle-class-dominated Social Sciences Programme (Ambjörnsson, 2004). There is similar reasoning for VET teachers who have their previous occupation as the ideal (Berner, 1989). These teachers distanced themselves from the teaching profession by describing a teacher as someone who wants to dominate students in the classroom and who is associated with paperwork and administration. These types of simplistic and exaggerated distinctions, where individuals or groups

are reduced to a few characteristics, help to maintain and reinforce ideas of superiority and inferiority (Hall, 1997).

As this is a small-scale study, conclusions should be drawn with caution. Vocational teachers who have two vocations and professional identities (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén, 2014) find themselves in a complex situation when the discourses within which available positions are constituted conflict with each other. Male vocational teachers are surrounded by an exceptional male teacher discourse (Aavik & Ümarik, 2020), which, among other things, is considered particularly adept at discipline and order (Aavik & Ümarik, 2020; Lappalainen et al., 2012). The results of this study show that when female vocational teachers strive for order and discipline, they run the risk of being seen as angry and grumpy if they do not take up the Mother position. Accordingly, female teachers in particular are relegated to the Mother position, which threatens to both undermine the teachers' professionalism (Vogt, 2002) and contribute to feelings of exhaustion and inadequacy. This means that the gender order is entrenched in the work of vocational teachers. At the same time, it is important to point out that the Mother position can also be appreciated by students as well as teachers. One way to strengthen the professional identities of vocational teachers and to understand gendered working conditions could be to use the results of the study in vocational teacher education to explore and problematise the role of vocational teachers and how gender plays a role in these processes.

**Author Contributions** Eva Klope is the only author.

**Funding** Open access funding provided by Linnaeus University.

**Data Availability** No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

## Declarations

**Competing interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

**Ethical Standards** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants followed the ethical standards of the Swedish Research Council.

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