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Being and becoming a female student and worker in gendered processes of vocational education and training

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ABSTRACT

This article reports results of an ethnographic study of how girls are positioned, and position themselves, in relation to gender regimes in three vocational programmes in Swedish upper secondary education: Restaurant Management & Food, Health & Social Care, and Vehicle & Transport. The comparison shows that there are different possible feminine positions where the girls resist and comply to varying degrees both within and between the programmes, with expectations interrelated with discourses of consumption, caring and production. However, generally the position of emphasised femininity is most prominent and becoming a female worker in the programmes' settings involves complying with feminine ideals of a caring discourse, regardless of whether the VET is oriented towards education for masculine production work, or feminine consumption work.

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Introduction

Labour markets tend to be highly gender segregated, especially sectors that do not require higher education, in Sweden, the EU and globally (OECD 2017; Das and Kotikula 2018; SCB 2018). This is reflected in, and upheld by, educational systems that function as sorting devices of individuals according to socioeconomic background and gender (Reisel, Hegna, and Imdorf 2015; Smyth and Steinmetz 2015). Conversely, education can play an important role in challenging existing gender norms and gendered transitions. Thus, an important element of educational policy in the European Union generally, and Sweden particularly, is to counteract reproduction of gendered educational and vocational career development (Lappalainen, Nylund, and Rosvall 2019; SOU 2019; OECD 2004). However, gender segregation in the labour market tends to increase with strong linkage between education and occupation (cf. Beck, Fuller, and Unwin 2006), as in vocational education and training (VET). This apparent conflict with policy warrants further attention, and to contribute to its elucidation this article explores female students' positioning in gendered VET contexts in Sweden.

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In Sweden, there have been small changes in the gender representation in VET, but it is still largely traditionally gendered (e.g. Panican and Paul 2019). Students in Sweden are not exposed to tracking until their choice of upper secondary programme at the age of 15–16 years, when they chose between higher education preparatory programmes and vocational education and training programmes (VET). Since the gender divide is quite distinct, the VET students often find themselves in gendered educational contexts, which are boy- or girl-dominated by tradition, peer-pressure and/or other factors (Fehring and Herring 2013; Lundahl 2011; see Table 1). Consequently, VET students have to negotiate positions and identities in relation to dominant discourses of conventionally gendered environments. For example, Bredlöv (2017; 2018) found that a scientific discourse is a resource in the professional education of ‘skin and therapy’ students, but relational and caring elements of wider discourses of femininity strongly influence the students’ production as professionals. Similarly, Brockmann (2010) found that the (male) social identity of motor vehicle maintenance shaped the learning culture in a vehicle maintenance VET programme. However, despite the gendered vertical and horizontal divide in the labour market, where women often are disadvantaged, gendered dimensions of VET have received relatively little scientific attention (Reisel, Hegna, and Imdorf 2015; Niemeyer and Colley 2015). Since gender divides are particularly strong in VET contexts within educational systems, and relations between vocational education and occupational identities are particularly direct in VET programmes, we perceive a need for more knowledge of how different VET contexts constrain and enable student identities.

We focus here on girls in gendered processes in upper secondary VET, to contribute knowledge about processes of being and becoming a female student and worker in a range of VET contexts. We specifically address the following questions. How do the girls act within the examined VET contexts? What ways of being a female student/worker are, or are not, recognised, encouraged and valued by the girls themselves, their relatives, other students and their teachers? How do desired ways of being a female worker differ depending on the educational context and gendered discourses of the specific vocations? To address these questions we selected three Swedish VET programmes: the Health & Social Care (HSC), Restaurant Management & Food (RMF), and Vehicle & Transport (VT) programmes. The three programmes differ in terms of gender split (girl to boy ratios) and

Table 1. Numbers of students, and share of girls, attending the first year of each of the Swedish national vocational programmes in 2015/16.

Programme	Number of students	Percentage of girls
Vocational programmes		
Handicrafts	2200	95
Health and social care	3100	81
Hotel and tourism	1200	75
Natural resource use	2800	68
Child and recreation	2800	57
Business and administration	2500	52
Restaurant management	1800	56
Vehicle and transport	3500	17
Industrial technology	1400	14
Building and construction	3900	7.6
Electricity and energy	4800	4
HVAC and property maintenance	1100	1

Source: Swedish official statistics, SIRIS.

degree of gendering in the targeted vocation. HSC is dominated by girls and associated with female practices and contexts, VT is dominated by boys and associated with male practices and contexts, while RMF is mixed in these respects (Table 1).

This article focuses on the girls in these three educational contexts. According to our knowledge of relevant literature, there has been more extensive research on gender and class dimensions of VET orientations dominated by boys than on girl-dominated orientations (see for example Panican and Paul 2019 for a review of Swedish VET research). There has also been more problematisation of VET boys than VET girls. However, there are valuable contributions that we build upon, as briefly discussed below.

Framing the inquiry: being and becoming a female student and worker in VET

As outlined in the introduction, VET is a part of the educational system where gender and class structures are particularly distinct. In Sweden, there is a strong correlation between students' choices of upper secondary tracks and their parents' education level. VET tracks are segregated in terms of gender, but generally, the share of boys attending boy-dominated programmes is higher than the share of girls attending girl-dominated programmes (Table 1; Panican and Paul 2019). VET can also be regarded as more valuable for boys. A year after completing VET, more graduates from the five strongly boy-dominated programmes are in full-time employment, and they earn considerably more than graduates of the other programmes where more girls attend (Skolverket 2018). In addition, demands for higher (university level) education in occupations traditionally associated with women have increased in recent decades (Ledman, Rosvall, and Nylund 2018) and graduates from the girl dominated Health- and care programme together with Child and recreation programme has the highest enrolment in higher education of all VET-programmes (Skolverket 2018). This indicates that on an aggregated level, VET and the divided labour market both contribute to upholding gender order, and is strongly influenced by it. The gendered division of labour is the way in which production and consumption are arranged according to gender, e.g. the separation of male and female work and activities (Connell 2002). Some occupations in the labour market are associated with domestic work, and/or being a woman and a mother, while other occupations are associated with production and being a man. The vertical division places men in higher positions than women; production work, and thus men's work, has been more highly valued historically than consumption, and thus women's work (Connell 2009, 72–93; Odih 2007). We hereafter use 'production' and 'consumption' as representations of the gendered division of labour. In line with the historical division of consumption and production, Skeggs (1997) identifies respectability, and caring together with control as discourses of femininity that have historical consistencies. The distinction between male production work and female consumption work and caring chimes with the orientations and girl to boy ratios of students in our three focal VET contexts, and we find it helpful for addressing our research questions.

On a classroom level, VET settings provide arenas where students have been found to conform to a dominant discourse that cements their social identity (Asplund 2010; Kärnebro 2013; Palmér 2008) and female- and male-dominated areas of work and education have different social cultures (Lappalainen, Mietola, and Lahelma 2013). The gender code

can raise difficulties for students that do not meet gendered expectations for male or female students in their specific VET contexts. An example presented by Ferm et al. (2018) is how a male coded VET context (industrial production programme work place learning) produced different patterns of participation for male and female students. The female students were seen as unsuited for work in a male-dominated environment. A caring discourse has been found to permeate various female-dominated VET contexts. In HSC education, for example, teachers reportedly convey a perception that important expertise for assistant nurse students includes an ability to express a caring feminine disposition, in which empathy and communication are core elements (Rehn and Eliasson 2015). Similarly, skin and therapy students mobilise a caring discourse in their talk about their vocational identity according to Bredlöv (2017). A caring discourse can also be used to understand how students are met by teachers. The gendered context of VET and discourses of production, consumption and caring seem to shape students' identities, in accordance with claims that an important aspect of VET is for a student to become a certain person, and develop 'a vocational habitus' (Colley et al. 2003). The students' social background and gender interactively influence this process together with demands of (and norms and discourses embedded in) the work culture (ibid.). In this article, we adopt, like Colley et al. (2003), a comparative approach in an exploration of being a female student in three gendered VET contexts, and associated intersections between gender and VET.

It should be noted that gender is only one, albeit important, factor. Others include ethnicity, sexuality and socio-economic background, where the latter is of particular interest here due to its strong relation with VET attendance. For example, Skeggs (1997) has shown that working-class girls and women perform gendered subjectivities that differ from valued femininities within the middle class. She states that femininity is a form of capital – the discursive position available through gender relations that women are encouraged to inhabit and use – but it has less value than masculinity in the trade for awards in the labour market (Skeggs 1997, 10). Skeggs (1997) ascribes major importance to respectability and caring in the classed and gendered formation of social norms regarding, for example, work and vocations that are considered 'normal' or 'desirable'. Respectability is the quality or state of being deemed worthy of respect, honour or esteem, while caring encompasses both the activity of caring for and the emotion of caring about (ibid.). In a comparative study, Ambjörnsson (2004) observed that different femininities dominated in a higher educational preparatory programme class and a VET class. The higher educational preparatory programme girls largely successfully adapted to a form of normative femininity historically associated with the construction of middle class, whereas the VET girls, sometimes resisting, and at times not recognised by others, failed to 'be' within the boundaries of the norm of femininity. The VET girls came across as making a point of acting contrarily, being considered by others as, for example, too loud and outspoken (Ambjörnsson 2004, 306). Similar 'laddish' behaviour (e.g. loudness, rudeness, drunkenness, and openness about sexuality) among girls has been interpreted as a means of negotiating gender boundaries. However, as they act within strong norms of heterosexuality, the girls do not challenge gender order (Jackson 2006). In order to recognise different female positions, it is important to bring categories into the inquiry that help us notice when student behaviour does not match expectations (cf. Hegna 2017), and recognise that female students can break and comply with gender stereotypes simultaneously,

as Hegna (2017) found in interviews with female students about social relationships in single-sex VET. Examples of different feminine positions identified in previous studies suggest that it is useful to apply analytical concepts that recognise different ways of doing femininity, while recognising consistencies in the division of labour, desired female characteristics, and the influence of gendered contexts of VET on students' behaviour.

Theoretical considerations

We regard gender as 'a matter of social relations within which individuals and groups act' (Connell 2002, 9). 'Positioning' is in the article used to refer to how the girls 'do gender' and 'positioned' how others (teachers, peers, parents etc.) construct the girls. Further, we consider that there are different possible femininities. Following Connell (1987), we use the concept gender order, in which hegemonic masculinity is dominant over not only femininities, but also marginalised and subordinate masculinities (Connell 2002). The highest feminine position in the gender order is 'emphasized femininity'. The value of emphasised femininity is related to 'compliances with its subordination and is oriented to accommodate the interest and desires of men' (Connell 1987, 184). In an attempt to conceptualise a greater variety of femininities, Schippers (2007) argues that it is possible to identify other femininities that are subversive in that they threaten to contaminate the relationship between masculinity and femininity: e.g. desire for the feminine object (lesbian) or authority (bitch). We see this as a conceptual possibility to detect challenges by the female students of the gender order. At the same time, we keep in mind that the relationship between men and women may be in line with the overall gender order of society, but also may be expressed in various ways due to local conditions in an organisation or workplace, i.e. gender regimes. To understand gender order in which the horizontal division between masculine and feminine is important, we rely on the division between production work and consumption work, and their respective associations with men and women (Connell 2009). In addition, we find it important to consider respectability together with the activity of 'caring for' and the disposition 'caring about' for understanding desired femininities (Skeggs 1997).

Through empirical investigation of how the female students act and are perceived in the three programmes we can explore how femininities can be understood in VET contexts, thereby enhancing understanding of divisions in VET, and their relations to divisions in the labour market.

Material and method

In this inquiry, we focus on girls in Swedish VET classes – in which students generally have working-class backgrounds (Swedish National Agency of Education 2016) – to explore female students' positioning, in relation to norms and ideals of femininity, in a range of vocational contexts. By focusing on the girls in the classes we followed, we want to find nuances, and elucidate the girls' identity-forming processes, rather than comparing the category 'girls' to the category 'boys' (cf. Ambjörnsson 2004, 27; see also Reay 2001, 153). We base the study primarily on ethnographic observations and interviews with students and teachers of two classes in each of three VET programmes: Health & Social Care

(HSC), Restaurant Management & Food (RMF), and Vehicle & Transport (VT). The three selected VET-programmes are gendered in terms of the ratio of girls to boys enrolled and reflect a gendered divided labour market. We also considered the gendered division of labour (production and consumption work) (Odihi 2007; Connell 2009) in the selection of programmes, as the VT and HSC programmes are respectively oriented towards production work and consumption work, and permeated with corresponding discourses. The RMF programme offers an interesting contrast that is less easy to categorise: the training it provides for work in large bakeries or other food processing industries is strongly associated with a production discourse, whereas training for waitressing is more closely associated with a consumption discourse.

The classes selected were less gender-segregated than the national averages for the respective programmes, and the ethnic background of the girls varied. Although ethnicity certainly affected them in various ways (e.g. their talk, clothing, cultural conceptions of femininity, etc.), the processing of our data (by 'collective ethnography') did not indicate that it was a very significant aspect of their 'doing gender'. We found similar patterns in both our HSC classes, despite substantial differences in terms of ethnicity, and the variations within the 'non-Swedish' and Swedish ethnic groups were similar.

Four researchers adopted what is referred to as a collective ethnographic approach (Gordon et al. 2006). Two researchers followed four of the six VET classes, two classes each, and a pair of researchers followed the other two VET classes. Classroom observations of the HSC, RMF and VT classes were collected during 33, 24 and 27 field days, respectively. (The students were followed in their VET subjects, i.e. not their general subjects such as Swedish language, Mathematics, Social science et cetera.) In addition, we interviewed 25, 28 and 28 students, 4, 2 and 4 teachers, and 1, 1 and 2 heads associated with the respective programmes. In this process, all the students in each of the groups were observed, and interviewed (all gave their consent). Thus, we also have empirical data on the boys, and the whole material has been used in other studies that were parts of the same broader project. The rationale for solely focusing on the girls in the study reported here was to increase the sensitivity of the analysis to various ways of 'doing gender' as a girl in different VET contexts. Throughout the research process, we have followed the ethical principles published by the Swedish Research Council (2017) entailing informed consent, confidentiality and integrity. The students were 16 years or older, and could provide their own consent to participate. During the data processing and transcription, the informants were given other names (Table 2).

In the analysis of data (field notes and transcripts of interviews with students and teachers), we coded the findings according to the research questions. The groups of girls on

Table 2. Numbers of girls in each class sorted by programme. The class numbers (1 and 2 in each category) are arbitrary designations.

	Health & Social Care	Restaurant Management & Food	Vehicle & Transport
National share of girls	81%	58%	14%
Nos. of students	Class 1: 23 Class 2: 12 Total: 35	Class 1: 15 Class 2: 14 Total: 29	Class 1: 15 Class 2: 16 Total: 31
Nos. of girls	Class 1: 15 Class 2: 6 Total: 21	Class 1: 8 Class 2: 10 Total: 18	Class 1: 6 Class 2: 6 Total: 12

the three programmes were compared in attempts to identify apparently general aspects of all three groups, and apparently specific aspects related to the gendered discourses of the programmes. In the next section, we present findings regarding how the girls acted, and thus did gender. Then in the following section, we present findings regarding how others perceived them, and the girls' experience of others' responses to their ways of being a female student, and worker, in their respective VET contexts.

Acting femininities in gendered VET

In the process of analysis and comparison of the three programmes, we recorded clear signs that the degree of control of educational activities, together with the gendered discourses, affected how the female students positioned themselves as girls. In the VT classes, the girls spent more time working on theoretical assignments in the classroom area of the educational spaces than on practical activities in the vehicle hall, while the opposite pattern was recorded for the boys. Both classes we observed worked with teaching material consisting of two textbooks and web-based material, including questions for assessment of all the VT content areas in VET subjects. The control of the learning process in the VT programme was relatively weak, thus to a degree the students could choose how much time they spent working with the teaching material and in the workshop, practicing different tasks with various parts, such as brakes, drive shafts and suspension. Being in the classroom allowed more private talk and doings than when they were working in the workshop, as in this typical off-topic moment.

Three of the girls are looking at hair colours and hairdos on their smartphones. They are talking about doing an ombré, and show each other and me different pictures. Erica tells me that she used to have her hair grey:

Erica – Do you remember that?

Researcher – Yes.

Erica ... and then I dyed it brown, but then it turned green in the highlights. The hairdresser said I should make a red colour bomb to moderate the green. Then I made a brown colour bomb and it nearly turned black (field notes, Vehicle & Transport programme).

We recorded numerous observations of the VT girls spending a lot of time ignoring intended learning objectives, and thus missing opportunities to further their vocational knowledge and skills, as did some of the boys. However, unlike the boys, the girls also chose to spend time in the classroom sometimes (as in the example above) to perform a female identity. The classroom facilitated private talk and use of smartphones to perform such an identity much more than the workshop, which was permeated with an explicitly vehicle mechanic identity. Thus, withdrawing to the classroom rather than spending more time in the workshop gave the girls possibilities to act a form of female identity, which was more difficult to perform in the workshop. In this sense, the VT-girls complied with a form of emphasised femininity. A group of VT girls also candidly and unreservedly spoke about sexuality and bodies. We observed girls talking, while waiting outside the teaching facilities, about who they slept with, without appearing to mind one of us (researchers) standing beside them (fieldnotes, Vehicle and Transport programme). In the classroom, expressions like 'I've been on my period for three weeks

and haven't had sex [during those weeks]' do not cause much surprise. In informal conversation, both teachers of the class expressed difficulty in handling some of the girls' 'out-spokenness': 'One gets to hear more than one wants to' (field notes, Vehicle and Transport programme). These examples resemble behaviour exhibited by both the 'ladettes' observed by Jackson (2006), whose teachers expressed concern about the ladettes' outspokenness about sex, and VET programme girls studied by Ambjörnsson (2004). These VT-girls in our study can be seen as resisting norms of femininity, if respectability and control are characterised as core elements of an ideal feminine position. However, the girls also during observations and interviews strongly manifested a heterosexual identity, which is an essential element of emphasised femininity, in their talk about boys and their anticipated future in a steady heterosexual relationship. In a further complication of the observed ways of being a girl in VT, we also recorded the same girls taking responsibility for cleaning, while the boys ran off. However, it should be noted that we only observed this in one of the two VT classes. In the other class, the girls were not loud, and did not talk about bodies and sex. The VT programme was described by both female and male students as a ware-slave programme. They were sure that others positioned them at the lower end in a social hierarchy. One girl explained that VT students are more authentic and down to earth even compared to, say, construction programme students, who they viewed as snobby and posh in Gant clothing and said, 'We'll have more fun at work than the ordinary guys' (Amy, interview). In one of the VT-groups we observed, the girls also identified themselves with a more general anti-middle class culture (cf. Ambjörnsson 2004; Willis 1977). More generally, VT students' identity is clearly part of a (male) blue collar culture, and a suggestion is that the female students' acts of resisting norms of femininity play a role in identifying with the masculine positions within the vocation.

Turning to the HSC programme, the first impression we gleaned from analysis of the collected data was that there was little manifestation of the girls 'doing gender'. We observed that most teaching in this programme is in ordinary classrooms, in the form of teacher-class instruction, and large parts of the subjects taught are theoretical, and partly rooted in a scientific discourse, e.g. medicine and psychology. Therefore, the girls had less opportunities than the VT girls to withdraw and find places offering privacy. We observed variety in the ways of being a female student in HSC groups; some girls were louder and talked about private topics, such as parties they attended, whereas other girls were quiet if they were not addressed by the teacher. The boys in the same classes signalled that they were not participants in the feminine vocational discourse by being loud. However, our observations provided no indications that they acted, or were regarded as, tough guys. In one HSC class, the girls were seated in the back rows, keeping a low profile, whereas the boys were at the centre of the teachers' attention (Field notes, Health and social care programme). The HSC programme prepares students for work in a female sector, associated with consumption work (Connell 2009) and caring activities (Skeggs 1997) and HSC teachers have been found to emphasise a caring discourse (Rehn and Eliasson 2015). The programme is thus closely associated with female practices. Although we find that the educational context (teacher-led lessons) offers less opportunities than VT female students have (working on their own) to enter different feminine positions, the overall conclusion we draw is that the female students in the HSC groups act in line with feminine norms and caring discourses of the HSC-VET context. During the observed lessons we did not see them doing private things, like searching

for fashion or similar sites on their laptops, or, as observed in other groups, arranging each other's hair or putting on make-up. The HSC girls were also less intimate and physical with each other than girls in the RMF classes, described below. In summary, they showed little if any deviation from Ambjörnsson's (2004, 63) description of not VET girls, but higher educational preparatory programme girls as respectable women; moderate, in control, precautionous, empathetic, responsible and virtuous.

The organisation of teaching and learning in the RMF classes allowed less freedom to choose activities and learning spaces than the HSC classes and, especially, the VT classes. In learning in the bakery, or the kitchen, we observed little differences between the female and male students. Time and pace were outside the students' control, and the activities fostered a collective identity (cf. Nylund et al. 2019). In one of the classes, the boys in the class were not high-performing, and a group of five to seven of the girls both performed better than the rest of the class in the kitchen and (interestingly) performed 'personal' activities in school. Typically, when the day started in a classroom, the girls in this group prepared themselves as the teacher introduced the learning activities/content by sharing make-up with one another, combing and braiding each other's hair, and massaging each other. The teacher sometimes said that they should do things like that at home, but at other times did not respond. In this RMF class, the girls were in the majority, and the group of girls seemed to engage in a collective process of emphasised femininity. The boys in the room were in positions of marginalised or subordinate masculinities rather than hegemonic masculinity. However, the 'doing gender' seemed to be directed towards the group of girls themselves. One interpretation is that they acted to be perceived as valuable by their female co-students by aligning with emphasised femininity.

Previous studies have found that settings and practices of vocational education programmes traditionally designed for male students are more workplace-like and less academic (based, for example, in vehicle workshops or construction sites) than equivalents for women, which are generally set in ordinary classrooms with ordinary textbooks (Hjelmer, Lappalainen and Rosvall, 2014). Our observations extend these findings, in several ways. First, in the male-dominated VT setting, the girls found spaces to exercise femininity, which were classroom-like and associated with text-based content. Most strikingly, however, they created spaces providing freedom to be feminine and do private things. Simultaneously, some of them challenged dominant norms of femininity through talking openly about bodies, sex and drinking. A group of girls in one of the RMF classes also used the classroom to position themselves as female through emphasising their femininity in hair styling and make-up. Most of the HSC girls acted in accordance with ideals and norms associated with health and care professions. Although there were variations in the observed ways of being a female HSC student, we found that the main way involved being respectable, controlled and participating diligently in teacher-led instruction. The HSC girls acted (more than the boys) in accordance with ideals and norms associated with the health and care professions. We propose that the differences between how the girls in the three considered VET contexts acted and positioned themselves can be partly explained by the differences in gendered discourses of the programmes. In the next section, we explore how these ways of the girls being female VET students were recognised, or opposed by the girls themselves, their relatives, other students and their teachers.

Being and becoming a female worker

Our interviews and observations provide indications that the girls in the three programmes were being positioned, and self-positioning, as *female* workers. This was most overtly evident in the VT context, where girls reported responses to their choice of education that revealed they were breaking gendered norms. These included examples of feeling appreciated for choosing to enter a male vocation, but also examples of parents expressing worries about their daughters driving heavy vehicles or working (say) in timber-hauling or mining.

Mum is scared to death having me on the roads. She thinks it's great that I know what I want to do, but not that I'm going to drive a really big, heavy vehicle, and it may all go to hell, and that's why she's scared ... Dad, though, he's really supportive, he thinks it's really cool and he brags so much about me being in the programme. I think it's kinda too much, since I'm not used to getting that much attention. His boss has said that if I want work all I need is to come there, and yeah, he has a mate in [another town] who has his own company and he's said that if I want to haul timber, all I need to do is to show up. The way it is, I feel appreciated precisely for coming here [the VT programme], but at the same time, there's a lot of abusive and degrading comments, of course. Just because you're a girl. (Interview, Vehicle & Transport programme)

Entering a male vocational domain as a female was thus a mixed experience for the girls. They were ascribed value for being female in a male discourse, but the male context was perceived as too dangerous and demanding for them, and they were contested with reference to femininity. The entangled and contradictory discourses are also illustrated in the next excerpt, where two of the girls explain how they were perceived by their male peers and teachers. Ella and Annie sensed that the boys in the class failed to acknowledge the girls' skills, but their teachers were supportive.

- Ella: if you know how to do stuff, they're surprised
 Annie: yes, that's true, if you know something they're surprised as hell. I just go – 'That's sweet'. But other [times] ...
 Ella: if you don't know, then it's like, it's because you're a girl.
 Annie: also true
 Ella: they're like, don't expect anything
 Annie: but there's a difference between students, I mean young people, and like teachers here at VT. Because the teachers, they want us to be here. There's like nothing they want more than to, boost all girls and, hello! While, like, the guys think girls don't reach their [the boys'] level and if they [the girls] were better than the boys, then it would be like wrong anyway. They [the boys] couldn't accept that (Interview, Vehicle & Transport programme).

Thus, if the girls did not succeed, they were met with reactions that explained their shortcomings with their gender. If they did succeed, they were met with surprise because as girls they were not expected to know and be able to perform the male-coded knowledge and practices in the curriculum. Either way, the boys positioned themselves above the girls, according to Ella and Annie. However, the teachers' reactions were more affirmative according to the girls, who expressed perceptions that their teachers really cared for them, in accordance with VET teachers' expressions of responsibility to care recorded by Lahelma et al. (2014). In the following excerpt, one of the teachers refers to female characteristics when talking about the girls in the class:

The teacher shows me two trolleys on which some girls in another class have laid out all the pieces from an engine they have taken apart on a large piece of paper and written the names of all the parts, and where in the engine the parts belong.

Teacher: 'See how it looks when girls do the job. It's amazing, the boys would never do that. They toss everything in a pile and then they have a problem when they want to assemble everything.' (Field notes, Vehicle & Transport programme)

Our records also provide clear indications of the girls' presence in a VT setting being legitimised by their femininity and disposition to care for, and about (cf. Skeggs 1997). The girls' presence was valued because they were *female* workers. This is a discourse that was expressed by the girls themselves: 'employers want to hire girls, because we're more careful with the gear' (interview with Erica). The caring discourse was also expressed on several occasions in informal conversation with different teachers. When one of us asked a teacher during an interview if and how he perceived a masculine discourse in the programme, and how that affected teaching and learning, he said:

Your question is a bit old-fashioned. Today it's more, I think this is starting to disappear. There's still this idea that it's a male education, [...] and that it's a bit macho and so forth, but I think it's changing. The last three, four years. A lot due to the labour market, or the employers' perspective, they want to incorporate soft values in their enterprises. Generally, in the transport sector they are more interested in, or very interested in, having girls in the business because they're gentler with the vehicles, they handle the vehicles in a less costly way for the employers. Fewer accidents happen. That is, well yes, in the transport sector there's definitely that advantage. (Interview, Vehicle & Transport programme)

This is interesting in contrast to our observations concerning 'ladette' behaviour, and the expression (by the same teacher) that the VT girls were 'a bit too much'.

The female RMF students were also described as assets in the vocation with reference to norms of femininity. For example, one teacher noted that girls are increasingly coming into kitchens as chefs, and that they have advantages because of certain characteristics connected to ideals of a caring femininity, such as the ability to calm, and be calm and communicate: 'Guys have a tendency to either explode or say nothing. I've worked with chefs that threw knives and plates when something failed. I can't see that happening with girls. [laughs]' (Interview, Restaurant Management & Food class). The dominant gendered discourse detected in the RMF settings was related to the orientation and activities. Service and waitressing were associated with femininity, as addressed below in relation to a 'caring-discourse'. In contrast, in the educational contexts of the kitchens and bakery gender seemed to be less important. The clothing in the kitchen (for both males and females) consisted of loose trousers, a long jacket, an apron and a bonnet covering the hair. Piercings and jewellery were taken off or hidden by tape.

The RMF students had a functional attitude to their bodies, and did not let cuts or burns stop their work. Hedda, in one of the RMF classes, reflected as follows on how the body becomes a tool for the physical work and how that might be regarded as non-feminine: 'It's a bit funny to come home with burns and cuts, and say like "Well, mummy, this is a really feminine vocation, like, this will be fine. I'll get a really nice female body out of this".' (Interview, Restaurant Management & Food programme). The quotation shows that Hedda was quite aware that she was distancing herself from ideals of femininity. Although working-class women have performed physical labour throughout history, the

dominant discourses of femininity, with middle-class connotations, harbour the ideal of non-physical production labour (Skeggs 1997). In the RMF contexts we observed, the body was more prominent, pertinent and visible in activities related to service and waitressing, rather than kitchen work. The girls had to change into the uniform of a traditional waitress, and most of those we observed entered the role with make-up and tight shirts and skirts. However, several of the girls expressed feelings of insecurity about and awkwardness in this role, as Mary who we observed protesting against wearing a skirt (Field notes, Restaurant Management & Food programme). Emphasised femininity seems to be part of the vocational identity of waitressing. One of the teachers we observed described it as a form of role-playing, a sort of shield that protects your true self from your own insecurity, and from unfriendly or rude guests, when you are working. The girls seemed concerned that their position as waitresses could expose them to risks of verbal abuse by guests and customers. During a lesson, the teacher explicitly acknowledged the girls' perceptions and experiences: 'People who think they can own the waitresses and harass them, they are to be removed from the restaurant'. Another teacher addressed sexual harassment in a lesson on working environments as follows:

When it comes to violations, it's the person who experiences it. It's me that is violated. No one can deny my experience of violation. If one of you feels that a teacher is extremely unfair, then it's your experience. I can't argue against that. One can try to explain. What one experiences as sexual harassment. [...] Especially towards young girls. (Field notes, Restaurant Management & Food programme)

We conclude that in the educational practices of 'caring' for guests and customers, the RMF girls were supposed to act as female workers, being attentive and kind, while demurely defending their respectability.

In the HSC programme, the girls' educational choice harmonised with the social norms concerning what is desirable work for a girl and a woman. As described in the previous section, most of the girls we observed largely conformed with ideals of femininity, and especially (unsurprisingly), the caring discourse. Some of the HSC boys, especially in interviews, resisted close association with the caring discourse, and expressed vocational plans that did not include occupations such as assistant nurse. Part of the caring discourse is to direct attention to the needs of other, and in that process learn to be flexible, in control, kind and pleasant. In many respects, the ideal identity of an assistant nurse is closely associated with emphasised femininity, but HSC students also activate a scientific discourse in building their professional identity. In a previous study, we concluded that critical thinking was more strongly promoted in the HSC programme than in the VT and RMF programmes, but discussions about power structures were marginalised in the educational content (Rönnlund et al. 2019). Thus, the gendered ideals of the vocation did not seem to be problematised during the education we observed. We have few records of students being provided with opportunities to understand power relations of gender, which could have provided means to challenge the gendered identity and gendered structures. The HSC girls had far fewer opportunities than the RMF girls to discuss and problematise issues related to sexual assaults and harassment, although they would work intimately with care-recipients. Even though critical thinking has a more prominent role in HSC programme (than in VT and RMF programme respectively) the dominant impression is that the HSC girls position themselves and act in accordance with a caring discourse that

includes expectations for female students, and workers, to be in control, respectable and caring. That a caring discourse permeates the education towards assistant nurse might be in line with expectations. However, as our findings indicate, a caring discourse that is closely associated with being female contributes to the professional development of female RMF students and, possibly even more interestingly, VT students in Sweden.

Discussion

A brief summary of the main conclusions is that the girls in all three programmes were ascribed value for entering positions close to emphasised femininity, and could contribute to the associated professions as carriers of a caring-discourse. It is through being a female worker, regardless of the gendered discourse of their respective educational programmes and vocations, that the girls' presence was justified and legitimised. We detected few opportunities for the girls to access ways of thinking and acting that could empower them. We also identified little content or forms of learning that could help the students recognise and understand power relations, e.g. between colleagues, in relation to customers and care-recipients and employers. Thus, girls in such situations missed opportunities to understand their own gendered and classed position, and were not challenged to enter different gender positions.

In our exploration of Swedish female students' positioning in VET, we found variation ranging from being responsible, orderly and non-challenging (particularly in the HSC classes) to being loud and outspoken (particularly in the VT classes). One way of interpreting the latter is that it provides a way to conform to the male discourse of VT, and accordingly we have observed cases of girls apparently associating with a collective male working-class identity. Another interpretation is that by breaking with norms of emphasised femininity the girls challenge the gender regime they experience in the local context. However, as female workers they are primarily ascribed value by associations with the female practices of caring (for equipment in the VT setting). These results concerning VT, particularly the girls' experience of their teachers ascribing them value for being feminine, conflict with findings by Ferm et al. (2018) that female students were seen as unsuited for work in a male-dominated environment. In contrast, RMF girls find themselves in settings permeated by discourses of both production, associated with men, and discourses of consumption, associated with women. In the production discourse, feminine and masculine positions do not come across as clearly separated, based on our observations. In learning and teaching activities most strongly associated with the consumption discourse, attending to guests, the ideal conveyed to the female students is more clearly a feminine position. However, the girls expressed ambivalence about adopting the position, the associated visibility of their place in both class and gender orders, and vulnerability to others in more powerful positions (due to gender, age and role as guests). The context and girls' feminine positions were more harmonious in the HSC settings than in the VT and RMF settings. Despite variations among the HSC girls in how they performed femininity, our observations and interviews indicated the presence of an overarching feminine position of being a professional care-giver. This appears to be partly rooted in a scientific discourse of the learning content, and partly in the feminine ideal of a caring discourse. The use of a scientific discourse to self-position in a predominantly feminine vocation is in line with findings by Bredlöv (2017). We also found that boys tended to

position themselves at some distance from the female caring discourse in this setting, and relied more than girls on the scientific discourse.

Previous studies of female students in VET have compared the positions of female Health and Social Care students with the positions of their male peers (Hedlin 2014) or with male students in Building and Construction Programme (Hedlin and Åberg 2013). Further, studies have compared female students in VET with higher educational preparatory programme girls (Ambjörnsson 2004), or focused on a particular context (e.g. Bredlöv 2018). In contrast, we compared female students associated with different VET programmes, and detected substantial variation in the way they 'were' female students, both between and within the three contexts. The examples we saw of explicit 'laddish' behaviour (cf. Jackson 2006) were nearly all in the male-dominated VT context, and we detected none in the female-dominated HSC context. Many of the girls' being was in line with gendered expectations of (valued) behaviour, which on one level was similar in all three contexts, as it include a strong element of 'caring for' and 'caring about' (Skeggs 1997). On another level, the three contexts provided strikingly different opportunities to enter feminine positions depending on female/male dominance (cf. Lappalainen, Mietola, and Lahelma 2013). We observed examples in both VT and RMF contexts (but not HSC contexts) of girls 'doing gender' by focusing on their appearance. Such differences may be partly due to differences in the organisation and control of the teaching. For example, teacher-led whole class instruction with a theoretical content, as in the HSC programme, provided few 'doing' opportunities other than participation (except perhaps complete rebellion and expulsion). In contrast, the individualised learning processes of the VT programme gave the girls opportunities to do private things. The most valuable female position in gender order is emphasised femininity, a position related to male dominance. We have observed behaviour (laddish) in this context that could be interpreted as a subversive femininity, not playing along with the rules of gender order. However, we have also observed ways of doing femininity (e.g. putting on make-up) that seemed most immediately directed to other girls in the room, although they gain value from aligning with emphasised femininity. In overall summary, the study has shown that being and becoming a female student and worker in VET is a complex process. The knowledge obtained in this study about how gendered divisions in VET are contested and reproduced may contribute to discussions on ways to challenge gendered inequalities in VET and labour markets that have didactical relevance and help elucidation of issues currently facing educational sociologists.

Conclusions

The most striking conclusion of this study is that a caring discourse can be entwined, for female students, not only with discourses and activities related to consumption work and relational work with people, but also those related to working with machines. This extends previous findings that a caring discourse is important in VET contexts associated with consumption rather than production, including spa and skin therapy (Bredlöv 2017) and HSC (Rehn and Eliasson 2015). The relatively strong emphasis on being a female student and becoming a female worker through being and becoming (cf. Colley et al. 2003) 'caring' suggests that women entering a vocation dominated by men does not in itself challenge gendered norms. On the other hand, female students entering a male VET domain and the

construction of characteristics associated with gender stereotypes of femininity as valuable for work in that domain may contribute to de-stabilisation of the male norm of the vocation. However, if this has any effect on the gender order of the labour market will depend on whether the vocations are re- and/or de-valued as more women enter.

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