



Exploring Finnish vocational teachers' agency in teaching migrant students

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Abstract

This study examines how vocational teachers perceive their agency as professionals teaching adult migrant students and what hinders these teachers' agency when approaching migrant students. Thematic analysis of interviews with 12 teachers and the director of the institute with experience in teaching adult migrant students revealed two ways of acting as teachers of migrant students by: (1) limiting own responsibilities to teaching contents of vocational subjects; (2) assuming a broader set of responsibilities in supporting migrant students. Independently of the undertaken position and depending on the situation, these teachers actively searched for new ways of supporting migrant students. The teachers' professional agency and ability to undertake new responsibilities were delimited by restricting assumptions on migrants, their skills, the role of VET as well as challenges with the distribution of resources, teachers' lack of knowledge in some areas and lack of professional development support. Thus, VET teachers' in-service and on-the-job training must be reshaped to meet changing conditions and to create possibilities for rethinking of their responsibilities and the redistribution of resources.

Keywords: vocational teachers, adult education, migrant students, teacher agency, professional agency, Finland



Introduction

The importance of vocational education and training (VET) for vulnerable groups, such as migrants and refugees, has been recognised in Finland and elsewhere because of its potential to unlock migrants' skills and promote their transition into employment (Bergseng et al., 2019; Moreno Herrera et al., 2022; Wedekind et al., 2018). Such potential and belief of VET being an easy educational path for second language learners stems above all from VET's practical character and its close relationship to working life (Henning-Loeb, 2020; Paul, 2023). However, it has also been acknowledged that theoretical components pose a significant challenge for migrant students (Paul, 2023). Thus, teachers' actions and practices have been identified as crucial factors in the successful completion of vocational studies (Kärkkäinen & Tarnanen, 2022; Blixen & Hellne-Halvorsen, 2022). Yet, while the complexity of vocational teachers' responsibilities is growing, their capacity to support vulnerable students, including migrant students, are decreasing (Tikkanen et al., 2024). Shortcomings in VET practices in addressing the needs of second-language students have been noted too (Henning-Loeb, 2020; Onsando & Billett, 2009; Paul, 2023). Therefore, understanding and supporting *teacher agency* in VET plays a crucial role in enhancing the learning experiences of vulnerable students and supporting their integration into work communities (Wedekind et al., 2018).

By teacher agency we understood a dynamic construct informed by teachers' beliefs (Biesta et al., 2015) where teachers actively make decisions, take actions, and leverage their capabilities within the framework of available resources, institutional norms, and policies (Lasky, 2005). As the context of VET increasingly involves more than vocational field-specific content delivery, with teachers being expected to act as reflective practitioners, change agents, collaborators, this study employs the concept of *professional agency* to capture various responsibilities that VET teachers must undertake in this changing educational landscape. VET teachers' professional agency encompasses how they adapt their practices, interact with diverse learners and other teachers and actors in a learning process (Lasky, 2005; Pantić et al., 2024). Both teachers' agency and professional agency refer to the capacity of individuals to act intentionally according to own beliefs, values and abilities, make choices in their professional context, and contribute to improving classroom climate and relationships between students (Schmid et al., 2021), as well as advancing broader goals like promoting social justice (Pantić, 2017). We acknowledge complementary aspects of agency relating to individual dimensions such as beliefs or conditions for intentional, professional acting related to the context and dynamic and relational aspects of agency highlighting agency being situation-bounded and constructed and dependent on a certain social, organisational, and institutional context.

A deeper understanding of the interplay between teacher agency, professional agency, new expectations in a given context, and teachers' beliefs about their work, others, VET education and their responsibilities when teaching migrants can provide valuable insights. These insights are essential for supporting teachers' professional learning and guiding educational and policy initiatives to better equip educators for the demands of diverse and dynamic classrooms and new professional responsibilities. Therefore, this study explores vocational teachers' agency by focusing on their perception on and beliefs about teaching migrant students, as well as their responses to circumstances arising from migration and presence of migrants in vocational education. The study addresses the following research questions:

- How do VET teachers perceive their agency when teaching adult migrant students and what beliefs it is based on?
- What hinders VET teachers to exercise their professional agency?

This article is structured as follows. We begin with a reflection on the responsibilities and required competences of VET teachers in teaching migrant students. Next, we discuss the concepts of teacher and professional agency especially in relation to teachers' beliefs, followed by an overview of the Finnish VET context. We then describe the sample, data collection, and analysis methods. The findings section focuses on two distinct ways in which teachers perceive their agency and related to it beliefs: (1) as delimiting, where responsibilities are easily narrowed to teaching VET content, and (2) as responsive, where teachers adopt a broader set of responsibilities in response to the emerging context. We also examine the factors that hinder teachers' agency in supporting migrant students. In the discussion, we summarise the key findings and explore how these insights illuminate the role of beliefs, also those related to contextual factors, in shaping VET teachers' agency when teaching migrant students.

Vocational teachers' work and responsibilities when teaching adult migrant students

The increased number of VET students with second language backgrounds is opening new dimensions, posing new challenges, and necessitating changes in teachers' work (Guo & Jamal, 2011; Henning-Loeb, 2020; Moreno Herrera et al., 2022; Wedekind et al., 2018). Teaching in these new circumstances requires a new and much broader set of professional competencies (Buyruk, 2014; Smith & Yasukawa, 2017). New duties add to the complexity of the already multi-dimensional nature of VET teachers' work (Antera, 2023; Keurulainen et al., 2014) and may further challenge teachers' work and their professional agency. Clearly, students in settings characterised by cultural and linguistic diversity cannot be approached and taught in the same way as students with a homogenous cultural

background (Paul, 2022) and speak the language of the school fluently (Blixen & Hellne-Halvorsen, 2022; Obondo, 2017). Instead, teachers are expected to create a learning environment that is engaging and accessible to this broader range of students and supporting them in successfully navigating their daily lives in the new society (Kärkkäinen, 2017; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and be knowledgeable in teaching literacy (Blixen & Hellne-Halvorsen, 2022). Teaching in VET is characterised by both deep subject expertise and identification with one's own vocational field (Smith & Yasukava, 2017) and pedagogical know-how (Andersson & Köpsén, 2015). In addition, VET teachers are increasingly expected to be adaptable and multi-skilled (Cort, 2010; Ümarik & Rekkor, 2013) and this is highlighted even more when working with vulnerable students (Sirk et al., 2021). When teaching in these new circumstances, teachers are expected to consider language needs and collaborate with second-language teachers (Onsando & Billett, 2009; Paul, 2023) as well as other actors (Pantić et al., 2024), have cultural competence (Brinkley, 2015), take actions towards sustaining cultural and linguistic diversity (Smith & Yasukava, 2017; Wedekind et al., 2018), and adjust one's teaching styles and practices to second language learners (Kärkkäinen, 2017; Henning-Loeb, 2020). In addition, teachers are required to act as mentors and provide psychological support and guidance in navigating through the education system and the labour market (Wedekind et al., 2018), while acting at the same as language teacher, counsellor, social worker (Keurulainen et al., 2014; Tikkanen, 2024), or/and coach, helping students with their studies, life matters, and becoming a member of the vocational community (Köpsén, 2014). In a broader discussion on teachers' responsibilities it has been noted that teachers act as implementors of their school and state policies, and when doing that they can step up beyond what is expected from them or above it and act as an agent of change (Buchanan, 2015). It has been acknowledged that VET teachers adapt differently to societal and educational changes and can have different understandings of their work and professionalism mainly because of their personal predispositions, leadership, and work support (Ümarik, 2015; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). The fact that VET teachers adapt differently to societal and educational changes shows that agency is not uniform. Some teachers may embrace change, while others may resist or struggle with it.

Teacher beliefs and agency

In this study we approach agency from the perspective of teachers' beliefs. We are driven by the recognition that agency has dynamic and temporal character and is informed by teachers' beliefs about the purpose of education and their professional responsibilities in a given context (Vähäsantanen, 2015). We understand teachers' beliefs as an affective type of narratives relying on some earlier notices of evaluative character (Nespor, 1987) that VET is about teaching VET

contents and preparation to a working life (Antera, 2023). In other words, teachers' beliefs are sets of explicit and implicit ideas, assumptions that teachers may hold, in this case about learning and teaching of migrant students, their responsibilities as teachers, and the purpose of vocational education in teaching migrants. The relationship between beliefs and undertaking professional responsibilities is reciprocal: undertaking new duties shapes teachers' beliefs and vice versa (Biesta et al., 2015). It has also been noticed that beliefs impact practices, but they are durable and difficult to change (Pajares, 1992). Transforming practices becomes particularly difficult when established professional knowledge, intentions, and beliefs conflict with newly expected responsibilities (Thornburg & Mungai, 2011), leading to expressing agency through resistance (Bonner et al., 2019).

It has been recognised that teachers' beliefs about their work and their professional responsibilities (Biesta et al., 2015), intertwined with existing assumptions and discourses present in a certain work context (Eteläpelto et al., 2015), shape their perceptions and judgments in decision-making and classroom actions in general (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992), as well as when approaching migrant students (Pantić et al., 2024). This view on agency is in line with a sociocultural perspective on professional agency, understood as teachers' willingness and capacity to act according to professional values, beliefs, goals, and knowledge in the different contexts and situations that teachers encounter in their work (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Weng et al., 2019). These different contexts and situations might be spaces for teachers' manifestation of their ability to act in new and creative ways or to resist norms and regulations that they consider unethical or unprofessional (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Lasky, 2005; Toom et al., 2015).

Teachers' professional agency is shaped by complex interplays between individual (e.g., beliefs, values, attitudes) and contextual factors (Goodson & Ümarik, 2019; Vähäsantanen, 2015). According to the sociocultural approach to professional agency, social context and cultural tools (e.g., curriculum guidelines) have an essential role in shaping the development of human beliefs, values, and consequently ways of acting (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). Also teachers' attitudes matter in teacher professional agency and teacher actions are mediated within available socio-material conditions (Eteläpelto, 2017), indicating that different contexts enable a greater or lesser degree of agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Following ecological views on agency, agency is situated and context-bounded (Priestley et al., 2012); individuals act through their environment, and a teacher may be able to exercise agency in some situations but not in others (Biesta & Tedder, 2006).

Professional agency involves a teacher's understanding of their own professional responsibilities in relationship to their social surroundings and society, and of their potential to broaden their own professional boundaries

(Matikainen et al., 2018). Relationships between teachers and learners (evident in the teacher's ability to negotiate pedagogical practices or classroom management strategies) (Eteläpelto et al., 2015), teacher collaboration (Edwards, 2007), and multiprofessional collaboration (Pantić, 2017; Pantić et al., 2024) are integral parts and expressions of agency. However, when it comes to relationships and collaboration, teachers may hold certain perceptions and beliefs not only as individuals but also collectively (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). A disconnect between individual teachers' values and broader institutional narratives – alongside the absence of a clear, shared professional vision for education – suggests that fostering teacher agency depends not only on personal beliefs, but also on collective reflection and development (Biesta et al., 2015). Reflexivity, a capacity to reflect own perceptions, practices, and social context to make improvement, is an essential part of agency (Archer, 2000; Pantić & Florian, 2015). Thus, our basic assumption is that the actions of vocational teachers in teaching students with a migrant background are shaped by their beliefs that can either strengthen teachers' agency – encouraging them to seek flexible solutions and support students' individual needs – or limit it, especially if students are primarily seen as challenges or exceptions. Therefore, we focus on teacher beliefs to get a sense of the individual and collective discourses that inform teachers' perceptions, judgements, and decision-making that motivate and drive (or hinder) teachers' reflection and action.

VET teachers as agents: Supporting migrant students in Finnish VET

Teachers, including Finnish VET teachers, are usually considered active agents in the working community (Eteläpelto et al., 2013), and therefore their ideologies and perceptions of their work matter, and they might express these by creating and promoting (or not) more multilingual and multicultural learning spaces (Weng & Ataei, 2022). Although teachers at all levels in Finland seem to be well aware of the support that migrant students may need, in their teaching strategies, they do not necessarily have objectives concerning students with a migrant background or regarding multiculturalism, and they do not necessarily implement practices to support students with a migrant background (Pirinen, 2015). Several factors have been recognised as affecting teacher ability to implement inclusive practices including their professional and personal knowledge, teaching philosophy, and reflectivity (Weng & Ataei, 2022).

Finnish VET teachers' work and potential to support migrants in their learning and integration have been influenced by the sociodemographic and structural changes in the sector in recent years. In 2016, The Finnish Association for the Development of Vocational Education and Training [AMKE] (2016) has suggested reducing the language requirements for undergoing vocational training in Finland, and migrants have been reserved some slots. Consequently,

the number of nonnative speakers with varying level of Finnish, is growing (Education Statistics Finland, 2020). National agencies, for example the Finnish National Board of Education [FNBE] (2014), have encouraged VET providers to address migrant students' needs, and they often do so by offering such students language support (AMKE, 2016). All VET students are covered by the services of the student welfare group, a group of teachers and specialists responsible for responding to any problems that students face in their studies and everyday lives. This service was not yet available to adult students when the data for this study were gathered. Also more strict language demands were in place at that point. The adult institute, in which this study was conducted, preferred at that time to integrate migrants into programmes designed for Finns.

Important features of Finnish VET are flexibility, individualisation (i.e., personalisation of the study plan), strong links to working life, and teacher autonomy (FNBE, 2014). In Finland, VET is organised according to competence-based qualifications, which make it possible to recognise vocational skills independently of whether they were gained through work experience, formal teaching, on-the-job training, or other activities (FNBE, 2014). All these features of Finnish VET have been recognised as helpful in boosting the learning of students, including migrant students (Kärkkäinen, 2017), and set a frame for VET teacher work and their agency.

Methodology

Sample

Twelve VET teachers and the director of their institute, who had wide experience in teaching migrant students, volunteered to participate in this study. The institute is one of the biggest providers of VET in Finland. The director was interviewed to better understand the context in which the VET teachers worked.

The teachers were heterogeneous in that they taught different VET subjects and had different job responsibilities, ages, genders, and lengths of experience in teaching migrant students. They taught vocational subjects (i.e., social and health care [practical nursing], cleaning services, hotel and catering services, wood processing, audiovisual communication, business and commerce, safety and security, and construction); and some of them had special teaching responsibilities aside from being involved in study guidance. Their experience in teaching migrant students ranged from over 20 years (Teachers 2 and 11) to less than one year (Teacher 9). Some of them reported having living or work experience in multicultural contexts (Teachers 2 and 12) or having a multicultural family (Teacher 9). All of them could communicate in a language other than Finnish – commonly, English, Swedish, or German.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to ask teachers about their experiences with teaching adult migrant students and migrant students' learning, how adult migrant students learn best, and what is their, as VET teachers, role in adult migrant students' integration. The interview guide with pre-formulated questions was used flexibly, allowing the respondents to raise any topics they considered relevant.

Most of the interviews took place in the institute. One teacher preferred to be interviewed at university facilities. Before the teachers signed the informed consent forms, the main researcher further oriented them on this study and their rights as participants (i.e., confidentiality, voluntary participation, and right to withdraw). The interviews were conducted in Finnish, the main researcher's second language. Teachers offered explanations about the Finnish VET system when requested. At the same time, the interviewer was perceived as being affiliated with a Finnish institution and familiar with the Finnish context. The interviews lasted from 30 to 120 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify, describe, analyse, and interpret patterns in the interview data concerning the meaning that VET teachers ascribe to their responsibilities and capacities as teachers of migrant students. The analysis was data-driven, focusing on both explicit and latent meanings in relation to the research questions, providing the interpretation of patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We utilised in a flexible way six steps of analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) immersion in the data and repetitive reading of transcripts; (2) generating initial codes (interpretation of individual data items) by coding of the data with the same meaning, related to VET teachers' responsibilities as educators of adult migrant students, into one unit; (3) interpretation of aggregated meaning across the dataset by grouping of the coded excerpts into themes and subthemes; (4) review of the themes in relation to the coded data items, the entire dataset, and the research questions; (5) defining and naming themes, ensuring that created themes provide a narrative consistent with the dataset and responding research questions, followed by choosing excerpts from data used when writing up the results; and (6) writing the analysis part of this article and relating the results in the discussion part to the literature on teachers' agency, professional agency, and beliefs. We conducted the analysis using the ATLAS.ti. Table 1 presents the themes that emerged during the analysis.

Table 1. Process and results of the thematic analysis.

Overarching theme	Main theme	Subtheme
Perspectives on own responsibilities in teaching migrant students	Delimiting own responsibilities to teaching VET subject contents	<p>Not recognising migrant students' needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No changes in teaching noticed - Not recognising one's own responsibilities in integration <p>Shifting responsibilities to other professionals</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limiting integration to integration training - Integration as the responsibility of other professionals <p>Negotiation of own professional responsibilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Delimiting own responsibilities to being a teacher of a VET subject - Setting boundaries to own professional responsibilities
	Assuming a broader set of responsibilities in teaching migrant students	<p>Mediating between contexts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recognising a new teaching context - The VET teacher as an immediate contact and support person - Acting as a Finnish role model - Mediator between contexts and different sets of experiences <p>Providing timely and sufficient support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Offering more study guidance, if needed - Guidance on everyday matters - Psychological support <p>Supporting linguistic and professional integration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being concerned about their migrant students' professional integration - Supporting Finnish language learning (including vocational language)
Openness to new ways of supporting migrant students		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being creative, flexible and open to new practices - Attempting to understand migrant students' 'world of experiences' - Engaging into multiprofessional collaboration - Satisfaction with taking actions
Barriers to undertaking a broader set of responsibilities		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of expertise and knowledge - Presumptions concerning integration, purpose of VET and migrant students' backgrounds - Lack of adequate guidelines - Contradictory views of key stakeholders - No experience in teaching migrant students - Lack of dialogue on evolving responsibilities - Individual choices and characteristics

Limitations of the study

This study had the following limitations. First, the data represent only one vocational institution. The professional agency of VET teachers working with diversity may differ in educational contexts and settings with a longer history of managing migration and diversity. All of the participants of this study taught in the programmes designed for adult learners. The results of the study can be applied to other contexts with the awareness that group dynamics and possibilities to support students may be different in programmes in which both young and adult students can participate. For example, student welfare services available for younger students and mixed groups were not available to participants of this study, which might have an impact on teacher work and experiences of teaching migrant students. Second, the participants were found through an institutional contact person, which could have led to the recruitment of a certain group of teachers. To minimise this possible impact the contact person was carefully informed about the criteria for participation and the key aspects of this study.

Results

The data analysis revealed two themes signifying teachers' beliefs about and perspectives on their responsibilities and agency as professionals working with adult migrant students. These two perspectives were expressed in 1) delimiting own responsibilities to teaching VET subject contents and assumption of them being above all VET teachers; and 2) assuming a broader set of responsibilities in supporting migrant students going beyond usual VET teachers' duties. The first perspective was clearly based on some teachers assuming that they are above all VET teachers, their main task is teaching VET contents and preparing migrants to enter working life as any other student. Consequently, these teachers delimited their actions in certain situations to supporting migrant students primarily in study-related matters. The second perspective revealed some teachers (or even the same teachers in different situations) as more responsive to a broader range of migrant student needs, including those beyond the school context. These teachers followed the assumption that it is rather impossible to avoid new professional responsibilities in teaching migrant students, and support of migrants in VET cannot be restricted to the study-related matters. Regardless of the perspective adopted, and despite various barriers to their agency identified such as lack of expertise, knowledge about migrant students' needs, or guidelines, these teachers often actively sought ways to support migrant students - whether in study matters (Perspective 1) or more holistically (Perspective 2). Figure 1 provides a brief summary of the results and the relationship between identified themes and sub-themes.

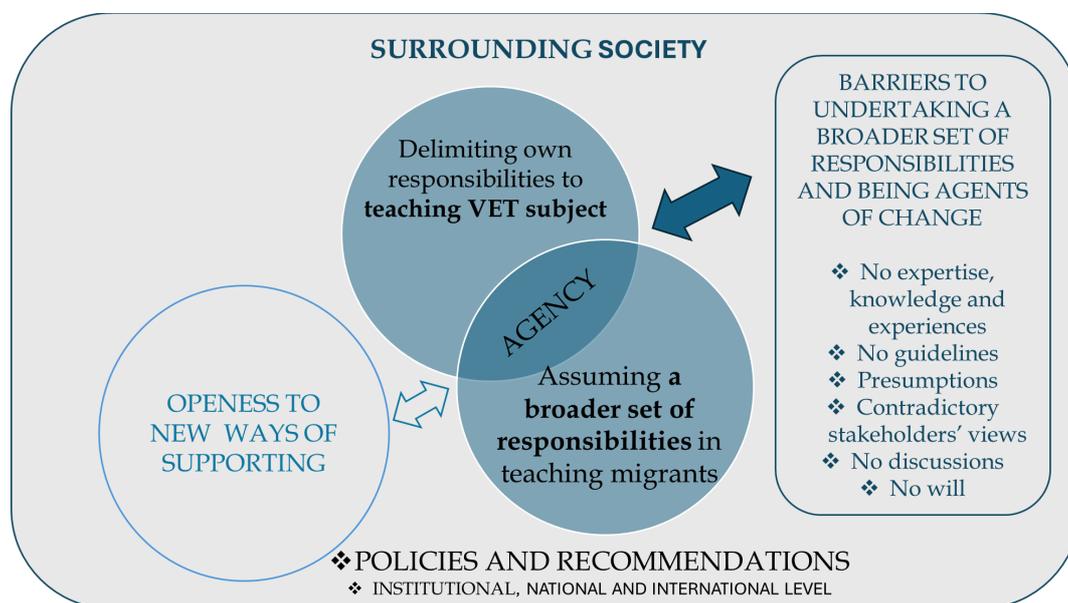


Figure 1. Summary of results.

VET teachers' perspectives on own responsibilities in teaching migrant students

Delimiting own responsibilities to teaching VET subject contents

Some of the interviewees, at least in some situations and circumstances, assumed that their job was no different from what it used to be without recognising migrant students' need for extra support and guidance and the changing context related to demand to work with multicultural groups. Such a view was based on these teachers' belief that their primary duty was to be a VET educator in a specific field teaching VET contents. For example, Teacher 4 said:

Well, a vocational subject teacher no longer really plays a role [in the integration]. We don't have any special role like in preparatory education. There's a plan, there's no particular mention of that [...]. So, yes, supporting the integration process is the responsibility of the Finnish language teachers.

A few other teachers seemed to be convinced that the responsibility for supporting migrant students in managing their lives in Finland lay with those working in integration training and with professionals outside VET, such as social workers. One interviewee, who was teaching business and commerce, even implied that migrant students, when entering VET programmes, already had their lives under control, had completed their integration and did not need further support in their everyday lives or extra support in study matters. Clearly,

in these cases, these teachers assumed that it is possible to delimit their own responsibilities in supporting migrants and delegate some of these responsibilities to other, better trained in this regard, professionals. This was at least obvious in the following reflection by Teacher 8:

At least, I don't want to be like, to be too much of, a mother. I just want to be like a mother as concerns study matters. I don't want to start solving other problems. I'd say then, we have a social worker who helps, if there are problems [...]. I'm just a teacher. There isn't enough time. And there's a study counsellor [...] student health care and so on, and they then know the other [professionals and services] if [migrant students] need help on the social side.

The reflection like this can be seen as an endeavour by teachers trying to understand and negotiate their own professional boundaries when engaging with increasingly multicultural groups and exercising their agency through resisting certain responsibilities. At the same time this teacher relates to the context, available resources (no time), existing structures (role of counsellor), and discourses and assumption on who is responsible for supporting migrants concerning managing their everyday lives, as base for legitimation of the belief and choice of being 'just a teacher'.

Similarly to Teacher 8 some other teachers also believed that their job is to ensure that their migrant students would complete their studies. Teacher 12 said, 'My role is to be like their counsellor, the same sort of study counsellor, whether it's a Finn or an immigrant.' Despite these teachers' good intentions, this belief raises the question of whether treating all students equally, independently of their background, contributes to equity in education and society at large. Moreover, this quote can be interpreted as an example of VET teachers neglecting specifics of teaching in multicultural contexts and migrant students' needs. On other occasions the same teachers (Teacher 8 and 12) gave examples of them being concerned about their students' working life, development of vocational language, and adjusting their practices to multilingual learners and giving a lot of encouragement, indicating these teachers' beliefs and agency being dynamic and situation-bounded.

Rather than a long-term perspective of supporting migrant students' integration to society at large, the reflection like this may be an expression of a short-term future orientation focusing on supporting students in completing their studies, as any other student. Some of the teachers started their interviews by declaring firmly that they were VET teachers and were rather surprised (and confused) that they were being asked about issues related to integration matters and migrants' learning and managing their lives outside the institute, indicating holding limiting assumptions on what the purpose of VET in supporting migrants was.

Some interviewees (including the director of the institute) shared the views expressed in the foregoing statement – they had not thought about this topic in the context of VET from this perspective, and consequently they did not see supporting students in managing their everyday lives in Finland as part of a VET teacher's job. Instead, these teachers, as expressed openly by some of them, followed the belief of VET being about preparing (as any other students) to working life and a teacher needed to act according to responsibilities specified in (ironically, non-existing in this case) guidelines and policies.

Such a hesitation to undertake new responsibilities was also evident in Teacher 4's reflection on unused (or previously unrealised) opportunities for supporting migrant students.

I've sometimes been invited to attend Thai celebrations of light [...]. I haven't attended, but I think now that this could have been a way of supporting [migrant students] by going along [with] and maybe participating in their free-time activities.

Such an invitation challenges the social boundary between the professional and private spheres, because official guidance or instructions have no reference to allocating time for activities of this kind. Similarly to Teacher 8, also Teacher 4 was able to exercise her agency through intentionally denying arising opportunities of supporting migrants.

Assuming a broader set of responsibilities in supporting migrant students

Some of the teachers, especially those who reported having broad experiences in teaching migrant students, acknowledged that they could not avoid their new responsibilities in teaching migrant students and in considering the multilingual and multicultural context of VET. The agency of these teachers was characterised by being flexible and responsive to an emerging context and unwritten duties. In the view of some of these teachers, guiding migrant students was seldom limited to guiding students in study-related matters. These teachers gave various examples of being receptive to students' requests for guidance on different matters related to their everyday lives (e.g., hobbies, translations, or funding of studies) and interacting with Finnish officials (e.g., in filling in different forms or applying for a passport). Two of the interviewees reflected on advising (according to their own knowledge and possibilities) some of their migrant students about whom they should contact to efficiently deal with some issues (e.g., negotiating their working time) while helping on their own as much as they could. Teacher 2 summarised the discussion as follows:

Educators, they're often like social workers, because then come all kinds of personal things that we try to thrash out and perhaps, above all, we advise our migrant students who next to turn to.

The actions of these teachers were addressed by the assumption that the VET teacher is a primary contact person to migrant students and often one of few Finns that some students know. For these teachers it was rather clear that they serve as role models and mediators between the students and the Finnish society, believing VET teachers need to be responsive to this emerging responsibility. For example, Teacher 10 noticed that when teaching migrant students, he constantly engaged in discussions about differences between different contexts. He and some of his colleagues also acknowledged the need to act sometimes as Finnish-language teachers being convinced that it was difficult, meantime impossible, to make a border between teaching and learning VET contents and Finnish language:

Well, it's rather interesting to teach them because there's always discussion about cultural differences and then, it's also [...] always teaching Finnish. Whatever is studied, that always involves teaching the language.

Following this belief that they had responsibility to address the multilingual context, these teachers strived to scaffold both content and language learning. Some teachers mentioned explaining new terms, paying attention to what and how something was said, making sure that everything had been understood, adjusting teaching materials and assessments to the level of language skills of their migrant students, and supporting the development of their vocational language. Believing, that it is possible to take some steps towards facilitating migrant students entering a working life, some teachers reported adjusting their teaching to correspond as closely as possible to the working environment that their migrant students would possibly need to manage. Through giving reassurance and encouraging students in a range of situations, these teachers actively took responsibility for building students' self-confidence in entering a Finnish job market. Teacher 8 commented:

I've [sometimes] said that I don't care if you don't know Finnish very well, but you still know how to clean well and you're professionals, and the fact is then that you're the employees people want.

Statements like this one can be seen as expression of some teachers recognising the disadvantaged position of the migrant students in the work context and being convinced about own responsibility in helping their students with gaining the trust of Finnish employers. Indeed, few teachers took further, concrete, steps in this regard and they told us about writing recommendation letters and giving advice on self-presentation to their migrant students. Teacher 4 even visited workplaces to mediate misunderstandings. The provided examples were manifestations of teachers going beyond 'usual' beliefs on VET teacher responsibilities attached to the identification with their own vocational field and study-related tasks. Instead, teachers in these situations used their capabilities

and available resources to support students more broadly, also in informal spaces (though this was not expected from them). Through helping with mediating interactions in workplaces and everyday life, giving encouragement and positive reinforcement, these teachers undertook a long-term orientation to supporting migrants, presuming that their actions matter for their migrant students in entering Finnish working life and society at large. They seemed to adopt a holistic approach to learning, aiming for broader and long-term impact. Notably, no teacher reported being directly discouraged from offering this kind of support, suggesting they had such an option and the autonomy to do so.

Openness to new ways of supporting migrant students

Even though sometimes limiting their own responsibilities to teaching VET subjects and assuming that this is what is formally expected from them as vocational teachers, many teachers recounted some occasions when they actively responded to the challenges and thus, acted as agents of change. The VET teachers acted in these situations as initiators (i.e., developers) of new practices and engaged in multiprofessional collaboration, within and outside the institute, going beyond pure implementation of the practices, something that was officially expected from them. This suggests their agency being situation-bounded and these teachers having autonomy to be creative and flexible in trying out new practices. Such a process of constant engaging in finding solutions to various challenges in organising migrant students' learning and studies was visible in discussion with Teacher 4:

Such a decision [no possibility to choose specialisation] was made just because we teachers, we didn't have the resources in our working time [...] to guide the students as much as is required from us in practice. But when the group was already inside [the programme] and was already studying, then, we just had to think, 'How will we now manage with such a problem [need for a lot of guidance and not enough resources]?' And [...] we've done a kind of guidance in small groups and so on, not everything one to one.

These flexible ways of arranging studying, including suggesting that migrants take Finnish language courses instead of English, reflect teachers' openness to searching for constructive solutions to daily problems and their agency. Some VET teachers, as part of their response to their challenges in teaching migrant students, as individuals or as an institution, had tried out different forms of guidance and had developed collectively and over years the concept of a learning studio, where students could get extra support. Few teachers reported also using the potential of learning by doing and use of all senses in designing the activities. Experimenting with scaffolding content and language learning, for example by co-teaching with language teachers, was also quite common. Gradually, the teachers also changed their practices related to supporting their migrant learners' agency by shifting from helping them to encouraging them to trust their skills

and act. There was also plenty of evidence that some teachers actively changed their assessment practices to offer flexible and creative ways of recognising migrant students' previous knowledge, skills and experience. Teacher 6 shared:

I have [...] allowed students who failed an exam to take that exam again with another group [...] or have given the students extra reading time [...] and then, in the re-exam, I allowed them to write the answer first and then complete it orally.

The given example indicates that oftentimes teachers were very courageous when undertaking different actions and they seemed to be allowed to and trusted when doing that. Many teachers experienced their efforts and outcomes of searching for new practices and ways of supporting migrant students as very rewarding. Some reported receiving a lot of positive feedback from their students and expressed satisfaction in seeing their students succeed – both in learning and navigating their everyday lives in Finland – which further motivated these teachers to seek new ways of offering support across a range of matters. The willingness to explore innovative ways to support migrant students was both a sign of their agency and something that helped to strengthen it. Clearly, these teachers used the freedom afforded to them leveraging creativity and adaptability, thereby exercising their agency.

Barriers to undertaking a broader set of responsibilities and being agents of change

When the teachers we interviewed were reflecting on their responsibilities in supporting migrant students and ways of doing that, they alluded to several obstacles including (1) their lack of expertise and knowledge about integration and migrant students' needs; (2) the lack of adequate guidelines; (3) contradictory views of key stakeholders on migrant integration and required skills; (4) lack of dialogue on evolving responsibilities; (5) lack of experiences in teaching migrant students; and (6) individual choices and characteristics.

As some of the teachers believed that they did not have enough knowledge and skills to address their migrant students' needs, they passed on these students to other professionals. This idea was also evident in the interview with the director of the institute:

Often, the integration training teachers [...] have a better understanding and knowledge of [cultural matters] [...]. It's [...] part of their professional expertise. It's their job [...]: training this person on the ways of [acting in] this society. [...] The vocational teachers don't know about this.

The statement like this may also indicate the existence of the belief that there can be set clear professional boundaries as regards which professional is responsible for what. This also suggests that it is widely accepted that VET teachers are not knowledgeable in this area, and may point to lack of managerial encouragement to address the issue or to provide space for engaging in discussion on these

matters. Some teachers, indeed, expressed the view of missing the discussions on these matters and generally about supporting migrants in VET, creating confusion about what the role of VET teacher in this emerging context is. For some of the teachers, the interview was the first time that they had an opportunity to reflect on these topics, as Teacher 12 stated:

I haven't actively thought that I'd have any role in this. I only think that I support them as students, so that they get to study, graduate and hopefully get what they need to enter working life. Or maybe that is supporting integration? I haven't thought before about my having some role in it.

Such confusions undoubtedly functioned as a barrier to undertaking a more extensive array of responsibilities. The aforementioned statement indicates absence of established guidelines on the role of VET education and VET teachers in supporting migrant students, which was also confirmed in some of the interviews. Consequently, some teachers wonder about responsibilities of different professionals in this area, and how much they, as educators of migrants, should know about issues related to migrant integration. The assumption that integration does not belong to vocational education was very harmful. Though some teachers recognised that it would be good and ethical to support migrant students in managing their everyday lives, it was oftentimes convenient to some teachers to follow assumed (non-existing) official responsibilities and not making effort in learning more about their migrant students' needs. A few teachers admitted that they did not know how their migrant students were integrated, how much they knew about living in Finland, or what their skills level in Finnish, educational background or 'world of experiences' were, seeing it as hindrance to efficient teaching of migrants. Teacher 3 commented on this matter as follows:

And then, if you think about it, when you don't know the human concept, the concept of learning that each person who comes here has [...] if you don't know the culture and educational environment that's already there, on which learning is built [...] this is the challenge.

The excerpt may also indicate that some pre-assumptions on migrant backgrounds as being very different may work as an obstacle to teachers being open to finding solutions. Instead, some migrants' backgrounds were seen as problematic and successful completion of the studies was seen as their own responsibility.

A few teachers also pointed to differences in the views of key stakeholders (i.e., VET teachers, language teachers, supervisors at work, and migrants themselves) on such issues as the required level of skills for different purposes (including the level of Finnish language proficiency) and how to support adult migrant students in an institute and outside of it. These teachers felt that such

differences in views on key matters created confusion and work as an obstacle for them taking action on responding to migrant students' needs.

The lack of adequate guidelines, limited knowledge about students' needs, anxiety about difference and insufficient discussion on these topics created significant uncertainty – particularly hindering the agency of novice teachers. According to the interviewed teachers, it was only with time and through gaining experience that they felt confident in taking an active role. This included developing their own effective practices for supporting migrant students and negotiating their professional responsibilities. Despite existing obstacles, this process often led to a broader understanding of their roles as educators.

Yet, a lot seemed to be related to individual teachers' choices and characteristics. Some teachers deliberately adopted a narrow interpretation of the purpose of VET in teaching migrants, focusing solely on preparing students for Finnish working life – just as any student. This limited perspective might have hindered their own agency and potentially affected students' broader integration into society. While such choices reflect these teachers' sense of agency, certain decisions, beliefs, and individual characteristics may also act as impediments to embracing a wider set of responsibilities.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore VET teachers' agency in teaching migrant students and the underlying beliefs, also those related to contextual features, which shaped these teachers' agency. The analysis revealed that teachers held varying perspectives regarding their evolving responsibilities in supporting migrant students. Some teachers, in specific situations, preferred to limit their duties to traditional teaching responsibilities, identifying with the vocational subject they taught. In these cases, their agency seemed to be shaped by a short-term and narrow view of migrant integration – focused solely on formal education and preparation for working life (Kärkkäinen & Tarnanen, 2022). These teachers believed that they did not have a specific role in supporting migrant students beyond teaching vocational content and offering study-related support. This belief – that teaching migrants could be confined to delivering vocational content – prevented them from acting in accordance with their broader capabilities and understanding of their students' needs. Setting clear boundaries to their own responsibilities in teaching migrants was an expression of these teachers' agency through resistance (Bonner et al., 2019). However, others – sometimes even the same teachers in different situations – recognised that they could not avoid new responsibilities associated with supporting migrant students in a more holistic manner. These teachers realised that setting strict boundaries and limiting support to the physical spaces and operating hours

of formal educational institutions was insufficient. Instead, they acknowledged the need to provide assistance with issues affecting students' lives beyond the classroom. In these situations, the teachers' agency was characterised by responsiveness to new circumstances and students' needs. Consistent with earlier research, societal changes – particularly the increasing number of migrant students in VET – forced teachers to reconsider their professional responsibilities (Matikainen et al., 2018). This aligns with studies highlighting the expanding responsibilities of VET teachers (Antera, 2023; Keurulainen et al., 2014; Tikkanen et al., 2024) and the growing need for adaptability and diverse skills in response to societal shifts (Cort, 2010; Guo & Jamal, 2011; Ümarik & Rekkor, 2013; Vähäsantanen, 2015). The changing student population challenged teachers' agency (Pappa et al., 2017), which, as also found in this study, was situation-bounded, dynamic, and temporal (Vähäsantanen, 2015).

This study showed that many teachers had room to act creatively and adapt their teaching, reflecting professional agency as described in earlier research (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Lasky, 2005; Toom et al., 2015). The Finnish education system's and teacher education's emphasis on teacher trust and autonomy (Erss & Kalmus, 2018) likely supported this creativity and flexibility. Practices such as co-teaching and multiprofessional collaboration – encouraged across all education levels in Finland (Pantić et al., 2024) – appeared to further enable agency in supporting migrant students. Regardless of how teachers envisioned their responsibilities in this evolving context, they explored new ways to support migrant students, with those adopting broader responsibilities often going beyond standard VET content to support students' overall well-being. Their actions, reinforced by students' positive feedback, further strengthened their sense of agency.

The results suggest that actions of many teachers in this study were embedded in a context of certain institutional structures and existing discourses on integration, VET and its purpose, possibly affecting these teachers' beliefs about ways of responding to demographic changes in VET (see also Biesta et al., 2015; Pantić et al., 2024; Vongalis-Macriow, 2007). Most probably some VET teachers – perhaps unconsciously – accepted common misconceptions: that vocational education is an easier path for second-language learners due to its practical nature, and that migrant students complete their integration upon entering VET (Henning-Loeb, 2020; Paul, 2024). This perspective overlooks integration as a continuous, lifelong process across various spaces, ultimately limiting teachers' agency. Assumptions about the purpose of vocational education and where integration occurs seemed to shape teachers' actions – or inactions – and may have influenced student outcomes. Many teachers viewed their responsibilities in term of preparing all students, including migrants, for a specific vocation in Finland, likely reflecting the influence of the VET context and strong

identification with their own vocational field on their understanding of professional responsibilities (Matikainen et al., 2018). Yet, a lack of dialogue in the institute around VET teachers' evolving responsibilities in teaching migrant students might have further impeded undertaking new duties and outsourcing them to other, more knowledgeable, professionals.

The study also revealed tensions between official responsibilities and some teachers' moral or ethical considerations, which further constrained their agency. Teachers' responses were shaped by personal values and predispositions, aligning with earlier findings on the link between agency and individual beliefs (Biesta et al., 2015; Toom et al., 2015). Additionally, limited resources – such as time and access to relevant knowledge – further restricted revisiting their beliefs and ability to support migrant students' learning and life management.

In terms of practical implications, the findings highlight the need to revise teacher competence frameworks and in-service training in response to ongoing social change (Blixen & Hellne-Halvorsen, 2022). Consistent with earlier research, this study shows that novice teachers' agency is particularly fluid and challenged, underscoring the need for targeted support amid global, demographic, and structural shifts (Eteläpelto et al., 2015). For future research, more participatory approaches may be needed to deepen understanding of how to support VET teachers' professional agency. Methodological approaches such as co-creation and action research may help teachers to revisit their beliefs and make sense of both their official responsibilities and ethical dimensions of supporting migrant students.

In conclusion, clarifying the responsibilities of different stakeholders at the interface between vocational schools and workplaces may potentially enhance migrant students' learning experiences and strengthen teacher agency in supporting their educational and professional integration. This study also highlights the crucial role of leadership in creating opportunities for dialogue around evolving responsibilities in teaching adult migrants and in providing work-related support to vocational teachers.

Acknowledgment

The study is related to the FEWL project 'Enhancing Research on the Integration of Formal Educational Programmes and Workplace Learning', Funding number: 101079237.

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