



# Staying home as speaking out: Absence as a reflection on support in work-based learning

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## Abstract

Work-based learning is a central component of vocational education and training (VET), yet student absence from workplace placements is often understood in administrative or behavioural terms. This article examines how VET students interpret absence from work-based learning and what such withdrawal reveals about the relational, psychological, and organisational conditions shaping participation. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 26 upper-secondary vocational students in Sweden who experienced work-based learning as challenging, the study employs reflexive thematic analysis informed by the theory of communities of practice and Biesta's three domains of education. The findings show that absence from work-based learning emerges as a situated and meaningful response to learning environments perceived as lacking recognition, safety, or pedagogical purpose. Students described withdrawing in response to emotional exhaustion, relational insecurity and poor workplace treatment, experiences of meaninglessness linked to limited learning opportunities, as well as practical and structural barriers disrupting continuity. Rather than indicating a lack of motivation or commitment, absence functioned as a relational and communicative act through which students signalled that participation had become untenable. By reconceptualising absence as an educationally and ethically significant phenomenon, the article contributes by foregrounding absence as student voice and an indicator of inclusiveness and responsiveness in work-based learning arrangements.

**Keywords:** upper secondary vocational education, student absence, student voice, support, inclusion



## Introduction

Work-based learning (WBL) constitutes a compulsory component of Swedish vocational education and training (VET), regulated by the Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and the Upper Secondary School Ordinance (SFS 2010:2039). All students enrolled in upper-secondary VET programmes are required to complete a minimum of fifteen weeks of WBL over the course of three years, while apprentices undertake at least half of their education in workplace settings (Cedefop, 2022). During these periods, students are not employed by the workplace. Rather, they retain their status as students, and WBL forms an integral part of formal schooling. This distinction is significant in an international context, where work placements may be linked to employment contracts, as it shapes how responsibility, attendance, and accountability are conceptualised. In the Swedish system, non-attendance during WBL is therefore categorised as school absence, despite occurring in a workplace environment.

In this article, absence is conceptualised broadly to include temporary, repeated, or prolonged non-attendance, as well as interrupted or discontinued placements in which students remain formally enrolled but are unable to participate. Although these forms of absence may differ administratively, they are treated here as manifestations of a shared educational situation in which participation in WBL becomes untenable. The study thus centres on how students themselves make sense of staying away from WBL, interpreting absence as a meaningful response to relational, psychological, or organisational breakdowns rather than as a purely individual or disciplinary issue.

WBL is intended to provide students with access to authentic vocational communities, support the development of occupational competence, and enable the integration of school-based knowledge with workplace practices (Skolverket, 2016, 2023). These ambitions presuppose that workplace environments offer organisational and relational conditions conducive to learning and legitimate participation. However, emerging research suggests that such conditions cannot be assumed. While policy frameworks often depict transitions between school and workplace as coherent and seamless, experiences frequently reveal a more fragmented and uneven reality (e.g., Mårtensson, 2020; Nielsen & Tanggaard, 2016). Examining these tensions is therefore essential for understanding how WBL may, for some students, become difficult to sustain.

Despite the central role of WBL within Swedish VET, absence from WBL has received limited scholarly attention. It is most often addressed through administrative procedures such as attendance monitoring, rather than explored through students' experiences of struggling to participate (e.g., Böhn & Deutscher, 2022; Lannegrund-Willems et al., 2011). For many students, particularly those with prior school difficulties or identified support needs, WBL entails managing multiple transitions simultaneously. These include entering

unfamiliar workplaces, interpreting tacit norms, and negotiating expectations from both workplace supervisors and school-based teachers. When such transitions are insufficiently supported, absence may function as a form of communication (cf. Forsell, 2020). A signal that conditions for learning, recognition, or psychological safety have broken down.

To interpret these breakdowns, the present study draws on Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of communities of practice and Biesta's (2022) three domains of education. From this perspective, absence is understood not merely as non-attendance, but as educational in which participation ceases to be meaningful and/or possible. This theoretical framing foregrounds the relational nature of vocational learning and positions absence as a lens through which the boundaries and vulnerabilities of WBL can be examined.

Against this backdrop, there is a need for research that foregrounds students' own accounts of absence specifically from WBL. While existing studies have explored dropout, motivation, and supervision within VET, less is known about how students themselves interpret staying away from workplace placements. Research has focused on withdrawal from entire programmes, offering limited insight into the psychological, relational, and organisational conditions that lead to temporary or repeated non-attendance in WBL. This article addresses this gap through interviews with VET students who, in different ways, experienced WBL as challenging or found aspects of their vocational studies difficult. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do VET students describe and interpret the psychological, relational, and organisational factors that lead to absence during WBL?
2. In what ways does absence from WBL reflect breakdowns or possibilities within the processes of support, belonging, and participation that underpin vocational learning?

By centring students' voices, this article positions absence as a barometer of how VET enables, or fails to enable, young people to appear, belong, and learn as recognised participants within the world of WBL.

## Previous research

Research on VET consistently shows that students' participation, and continuity in WBL, are shaped by a complex interaction of individual, relational, and organisational factors. Rather than being reducible to personal shortcomings or lack of motivation, absence and dropout in VET appear as processes grounded in students' negotiations with their learning environments, institutional expectations, and social conditions. Research on VET spans different institutional models, which shape how participation, absence management, and support are

organised. In school-based systems, such as in Sweden, WBL typically consists of shorter placements embedded within formal schooling, where students retain their status as students and absence is treated as school absence. In contrast, dual or apprenticeship systems, common in countries such as Germany or Switzerland, are workplace-dominant, with longer periods of employment-based training where absence is more closely tied to labour market participation and contractual obligations. These differences have important implications for how absence is understood and managed. The studies reviewed below draw on both school-based and apprenticeship contexts and are interpreted with attention to how institutional arrangements shape students' participation in WBL.

A body of research emphasises individual and psychological dimensions of disengagement. Böhn and Deutscher's (2022) meta-synthesis demonstrates that dropout rarely stems from a single cause but emerges from an accumulation of fragile motivation, mental health difficulties, and unmet expectations, often exacerbated by limited support. Snell and Hart (2008) further show that dissatisfaction, unmet expectations, and experiences of poor treatment or exploitation contribute strongly to non-completion, especially in industries with uneven training quality. Vanneste et al. (2017) similarly show that sickness absence among Dutch VET students reflects psychological strain and relational tensions rather than purely medical causes, with students actively legitimising their absence as a coping strategy. In the Swedish context, Forsell's (2020) study of problematic school absenteeism offers a complementary perspective. Although focused on compulsory schooling, his ecological analysis demonstrates that prolonged non-attendance rarely stems from a single cause but emerges through interactions between individual, relational, and organisational factors over time. Forsell argues that improving attendance often requires changes in the learning environment rather than changes in individual disposition. This resonates with research in VET showing that students' participation in WBL is shaped not only by personal motivation or psychological strain but also by the responsiveness and structure of the environments in which learning takes place. Earlier school experiences of low recognition and distrust in teachers or institutions have also been found to undermine engagement in later vocational pathways (Beilmann & Espenberg, 2015; Nielsen & Tanggaard, 2015). Emotional processes further shape participation. Ryökkynen et al. (2021, 2022) demonstrate that among Finnish VET students receiving special educational support, feelings of pride and recognition promote engagement, while shame, often linked to comparison, failure, or marginalisation, leads to withdrawal, silence, and heightened vulnerability during WBL.

Research also demonstrates that participation in VET is relational. In school settings, Ingholt et al. (2015) show that supportive, predictable, and inclusive teacher-student relationships reduce disengagement and strengthen school

attachment. Similar dynamics are found in workplace contexts. High-quality supervision characterised by trust, dialogue, and availability fosters belonging and engagement (Schmid & Haukedal, 2022), while inconsistent or authoritarian supervision can generate insecurity and withdrawal. In line with this, Dagsland et al. (2015) show that apprentices in the hospitality industry often experience high expectations, stress, and at times disrespect or harassment, conditions that undermine motivation and contribute to withdrawal if recognition and support are lacking. Schmid et al. (2024) further highlight that students' perceptions of legitimacy and inclusion in workplace communities, through access to meaningful tasks and relational recognition, are central to distinguishing 'stayers' from 'leavers'. Feedback practices also matter. Wyszynska Johansson (2021) shows that feedback during WBL is often informal, affirmative, and non-instructional. While such feedback supports belonging, the lack of structured, developmental guidance can generate uncertainty and limit students' understanding of expectations, contributing to hesitancy or disengagement.

Power relations and social recognition further shape students' trajectories. Rönnlund and Rosvall (2021) demonstrate that workplace hierarchies influence VET students' opportunities for responsibility, voice, and civic agency during WBL. Students experiencing respect and agency strengthen their vocational identity, while those encountering marginalisation report reduced confidence and participation. Comparative research by Bruin et al. (2023) also indicates that young people across Europe frequently encounter restricted influence and insufficient recognition in VET, particularly those at risk of social exclusion. Krötz and Deutscher (2021) add that not only do organisational and relational conditions matter, but differences in how trainees and trainers perceive training quality play a crucial role in explaining dropout – misalignment in expectations and experiences increases withdrawal risks, especially when trainees feel misunderstood or unsupported.

Organisational and structural conditions surrounding VET play a role in attendance and persistence. Research shows that well-organised and meaningful workshop instruction fosters motivation (Nielsen, 2016), whereas disorganisation or low perceived relevance increases absenteeism (Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2011). At the workplace, Pfeifer (2020) finds that apprentices' absence is lower when participatory structures, such as works councils, enhance fairness and communication. Reegård (2020) demonstrates that informal workplace logics, prioritising efficiency and loyalty, may conflict with educational expectations, creating ambiguity that affects learning and participation. Harris et al. (2001) and Bosset et al. (2022) similarly show that retention is shaped by the alignment between students' interests, workplace culture, and the quality of training. Guest (2023) adds that when curricula are negotiated meaningfully

between employers and educators, students experience stronger engagement and professional identification.

Additional Nordic research highlights the importance of flexibility, and supportive relationships for students who struggle. Rokkones and Saur (2016) and Bunting et al. (2017) show that flexible, relationally oriented interventions can re-engage at-risk students. Tårnesvik and Schmid (2022) find that practice-oriented pathways enhance motivation and confidence through hands-on learning and recognition. However, research also shows that the success of such pathways depends on relational continuity and clear communication between school and workplace. Olofsson (2025) demonstrates that Swedish vocational teachers preparing students in need of support for WBL rely on individualised strategies, such as adapted tasks, enhanced communication with supervisors, and gradual exposure to workplace norms, but often lack institutional guidance or coordinated support. These gaps create vulnerability during WBL, particularly for students whose participation is already fragile.

Studies adopting student-centred perspectives illuminate how disengagement can express misalignment between learners and their environments. Tanggaard (2013) and Rodrigues (2017) show that students frequently cite lack of recognition, irrelevant teaching, or insufficient voice as drivers of dropout. Taylor (2008) and Sullivan (2021) highlight how structural inequalities, such as classed expectations in apprenticeship or rigid norms in professional placements, shape participation and exclusion, particularly for neurodivergent students. These findings challenge interpretations of VET and emphasise the need to understand absence as relational communication rather than individual deficit.

A number of common patterns can be identified. Absence and dropout in VET are best understood as relational and organisational phenomena rather than as individual failings. Students' participation is closely linked to the extent to which learning environments offer recognition, meaningful involvement, and coherent support across the boundary between school and work. When this are misaligned, the risk of disengagement increases, particularly for students with learning difficulties, psychosocial vulnerabilities, or prior negative educational experiences. Although existing research has generated knowledge about dropout, attendance, and supervision in VET, absence within WBL remains comparatively underexamined. International studies emphasise the significance of belonging, relational trust, and supervisory practices, yet provide limited insight into how students themselves interpret and navigate periods of non-attendance during WBL. Similarly, Nordic research on student voice and belonging has rarely conceptualised absence as relational response to the competing logics of education and production that structure WBL. There is therefore a limited understanding of how psychological strain, relational insecurity, and organisational barriers are experienced at the point where

participation becomes untenable. This study addresses this gap by foregrounding students' own accounts of absence and by analysing withdrawal from WBL as an educational and relational event, rather than as an administrative irregularity.

## Theoretical framework

WBL is understood as a form of participation in socially and materially organised practices rather than simply the acquisition of discrete skills (cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991). Within *communities of practice* (CoP), learning occurs as newcomers gain access to the activities, relationships, and cultural meanings that constitute a community. Participation is legitimate yet initially peripheral, and movement towards fuller involvement depends on how responsibility, trust, and recognition are negotiated with more experienced members (Wenger, 1998). From this perspective, learning is inseparable from processes of belonging and identity formation. To learn is simultaneously to become recognised as someone who matters within that community.

However, participation in WBL varies considerably across workplaces. Fuller and Unwin's (2003, 2004) distinction between expansive and restrictive learning environments captures this variation by showing how opportunities for guidance and participation are shaped by workplace organisation and culture. Expansive environments provide structured support and access to a broad range of tasks, whereas restrictive settings confine learners to repetitive or marginal activities. Critical readings of CoP further underline that learning within workplace communities is never neutral but entangled with power relations and the organisation of labour (cf. Contu & Willmott, 2003; Cox, 2005). These perspectives highlight that WBL is always shaped, enabled, or constrained, by the social and structural conditions in which it unfolds.

To interpret the educational significance of these processes, Biesta's (2022) three domains of education offer a complementary lens. Biesta conceptualises education as oriented towards *qualification*, *socialisation* and *subjectification*. While qualification concerns the development of skills and knowledge, and socialisation concerns becoming part of existing traditions and practices, subjectification refers to the process through which individuals come into presence as unique subjects capable of responding to, and taking responsibility in relation to, others and the world. Within this framework, support in WBL can be understood as an educational relation that connects these dimensions, enabling students not only to develop vocational competence but also to appear as recognised and responsible participants within vocational life.

The notion of absence as a possible expression of subjectification draws attention to the ethical dimension of participation. Biesta (2022) suggests that

educational processes may at times involve moments of interruption or resistance – instances in which individuals respond to conditions they experience as limiting or unresponsive. While this offers a productive way of understanding students' withdrawal from WBL, it also risks overemphasising individual agency. The theory of CoP describes participation profoundly relational (Wenger, 1998) and that withdrawal may equally reflect the failure of the community to provide mutual engagement, shared meaning, and recognition. In this sense, absence can be read both as an ethical response to constraining conditions and as a relational signal that belonging has fractured.

Although these two perspectives already point to complementary aspects of participation, it is useful to clarify how the perspectives contribute to the present analysis. CoP provides a lens for understanding the social and organisational arrangements that shape students' possibilities for participation, while Biesta's framework helps to interpret the educational significance of moments where participation is interrupted or withdrawn. In the analysis, CoP informed the identification of patterns relating to access, legitimacy, and engagement, whereas Biesta supported the interpretation of how students' responses, including absence, can be understood in terms of subjectification. Combining the two perspectives thus offers a way of analysing absence as both structurally shaped and educationally meaningful. These theoretical perspectives position WBL as both a pedagogical and an ethical practice. Learning is not only a matter of acquiring skills but also of recognition and purpose. The frameworks of CoP and Biesta therefore provide a useful foundation for interpreting the psychological, relational, and organisational dynamics that shape students' participation, and absence, in WBL.

## Method

The study employed a qualitative and interpretive design to explore how absence reflects experiences of support in WBL, and how students interpret the psychological, relational, and organisational conditions that make participation more or less sustainable.

### Participants and recruitment

Participants were recruited through collaboration with vocational teachers, who initially identified students that met the criteria specified for the study. To minimise potential bias associated with teacher selection, the researcher subsequently visited classrooms to present the project directly, inviting voluntary participation from any student who recognised aspects of their own experience in the study description. The inclusion criteria were deliberately broad, encompassing students who demonstrated or experienced WBL or

vocational subjects as difficult or challenging. No formal documentation of special educational needs was required.

In total, 26 students participated, including 18 female and 8 male students, representing nine of Sweden's twelve national VET programmes. These programmes were: Handicraft (HC), Restaurant Management and Food (RF), Business and Administration (BA), Natural Resource Use (NR), Child and Recreation (CR), HVAC and Property Maintenance (HPM), Health and Social Care (HS), Vehicle and Transport (VT), and Hotel and Tourism (HT), across ten schools. The sample thus captured diversity in vocational fields and institutional settings while maintaining analytic depth.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews designed to elicit students' narratives about WBL. The interview guide consisted of broad, open-ended questions followed by prompts to encourage elaboration and reflection (e.g. Bryman, 2018). While participants were recruited based on experiencing WBL or vocational subjects as challenging, this was not intended to predefine the findings, but to explore conditions under which participation risks breaking down. The interview design did not assume uniformly negative experiences. Open-ended questions invited students to reflect on both supportive and challenging aspects of WBL, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of their experiences. While most interviews were conducted individually, four were held with students who preferred to sit together, resulting in 17 individual interviews, three paired interviews, and one with three participants. Each participant answered the questions individually, even when interviewed alongside peers. This format accommodated students' preferences and at times enabled them to elaborate on one another's reflections, while still generating distinct accounts. Students had received the interview questions in advance, yet those who took part in paired or small-group interviews still shared experiences that might be considered sensitive.

Interviews were conducted in Swedish and took place in quiet rooms at the participating schools, except for two interviews that were held online due to distance and scheduling constraints. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and anonymised prior to analysis. The transcripts were then analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). In line with RTA, themes were understood not as objective categories but as interpretive constructions that express patterned meanings grounded in participants' accounts. The analytic process was non-linear and iterative, involving continuous movement between immersion in the transcripts and the gradual development of conceptual interpretations. Initial engagement with the dataset involved repeated reading and detailed memo-writing to

capture emerging insights and tensions. Coding was undertaken inductively across all transcripts at both semantic and latent levels, enabling attention to explicit descriptions of absence as well as to underlying assumptions. Codes were subsequently reviewed and compared to identify coherences and divergences. Contradictory examples were examined to disrupt early assumptions and strengthen interpretive rigour. Although coding began inductively, the development and refinement of themes followed an abductive logic in which empirical patterns were interpreted in dialogue with theoretical perspectives. This abductive movement ensured that concepts from Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and Biesta's (2022) three domains of education illuminated the significance of students' accounts. Theoretical engagement was therefore introduced only after preliminary themes had stabilised, allowing empirical meaning-making to remain the primary analytic driver. Throughout the process, professional familiarity with VET functioned as a resource for recognising pedagogical nuance, while at the same time requiring sustained reflexivity to avoid normalising the students' accounts of absence. Reflexive journaling, and revisiting of codes were used to enhance interpretive transparency and ethical attentiveness. In accordance with the principles of RTA, analytic adequacy was evaluated through the concept of information power (cf. Malterud et al., 2016), with the breadth and depth of the dataset assessed as sufficient for addressing the study's focus.

The final thematic structure emerged through an interpretive synthesis that connected participants' experiences with the broader relational and organisational dynamics of WBL. The four themes are conceptually distinct yet interrelated, capturing different layers of the conditions that shape students' participation. They represent analytically separable but interconnected dimensions, ranging from individual psychological strain to relational, pedagogical, and structural conditions, and are elaborated more in detail in the findings section. This thematic work enabled absence in WBL to be understood as a multi-layered relational and pedagogical phenomenon rather than as an individual behavioural deficit. In this way, the analysis represents a dialogic integration of data and theory, ensuring that students' voices remained the central part through which absence in WBL was interpreted as a relational, pedagogical, and ethical event. Quotations cited in this article were translated into English using a meaning-preserving approach.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval was granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2022) in accordance with the Act concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans (SFS 2003:460). All procedures adhered to the ethical principles of the Swedish Research Council (2024). Participants received written and oral

information, provided informed consent, and were reminded that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any stage without consequence. All data were anonymised and stored securely in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation.

Given that the study involved students who already experienced WBL and/or their vocational subjects as challenging, particular care was taken to ensure that participation did not exacerbate feelings of pressure or vulnerability. Interviews were conducted in a manner designed to support participants' comfort and autonomy, with open-ended questions allowing them to determine the extent to which they wished to share sensitive experiences. The topic was considered sensitive as it involved students reflecting on experiences of difficulty, vulnerability, and, in some cases, negative treatment during WBL. It could also involve aspects of students' personal circumstances, including references to mental health or other individual conditions that shaped their experiences. Additional attention was paid to the anonymisation of potentially identifiable details, including diagnoses and personal circumstances that, while occasionally relevant to students' accounts, were not necessary for the analytical aims of the study. These measures were implemented to safeguard participants' wellbeing while enabling their perspectives to contribute meaningfully to the understanding of WBL in contexts where learning trajectories may already be fragile.

## Findings

In line with the research questions, four interrelated themes were developed through the reflexive thematic analysis. The first theme, *Psychological distress and emotional exhaustion*, addresses the individual psychological burden that influences students' ability to participate in WBL. The second theme, *Insecurity and poor treatment at placement*, concerns the relational and social conditions of the workplace, highlighting how experiences of safety and fair treatment shape students' sense of belonging. The third theme, *Low motivation and perceived meaninglessness*, reflects the pedagogical dimension of WBL, focusing on how students' engagement is affected when the learning experience is not perceived as meaningful. The fourth theme, *Practical and physical barriers*, captures the structural and organisational obstacles that hinder attendance and active participation. All themes illustrate how absence operates as a multidimensional signal and structure across both personal and institutional levels.

### **Psychological distress and emotional exhaustion**

For many students, absence appeared not as a deliberate act of defiance but as a response to psychological overload. Across several interviews, students described living with depression, anxiety, or exhaustion that undermined their

ability to attend WBL. In these accounts, *not going* was experienced less as a choice and more as an involuntary withdrawal, a way of protecting oneself from environments that felt overwhelming. One student articulated this vividly. She explained that attending WBL had been difficult throughout her entire education:

It has been a problem throughout my whole WBL time that I've had difficulties going there. I've been diagnosed with [a mental health condition] and some other things, so it's mostly that. I just can't get up. It feels like waking up with a ton of bricks on my chest. (Emma, BA)

Her description shows emotional exhaustion as a bodily heaviness that makes it hard to act, not as rebellion or unwillingness. She contrasted this with her experience of school, where she felt expectations were more humane, 'It's much easier here at school, because they don't expect as much of me. Here I can come even when I feel bad.' This comparison illustrates how the emotional demands of WBL often exceed the support structures available in the school setting. While teachers may tolerate fluctuation in students' wellbeing, workplaces implicitly demand productivity and sociability – even on days when such performances feel impossible. A similar sense of fatigue appeared in another interview with Levi (RF), where he described how his 'body just shuts down,' adding that it was sometimes 'easier to accept not getting up than to fight through the day.' Levi framed absence as an act of surrender to physical and emotional exhaustion rather than a conscious avoidance of responsibility.

Several students also reflected critically on how the school responded to their difficulties and absence. Kira (HS) explained, 'I'm in school more than I am at my placement. I've wished that someone would ask how I'm doing when they saw I had a lot of absence. They only asked why I wasn't there.' Her account underscores a broader institutional tendency to treat attendance administratively rather than relationally. The formal question of *why* she was absent replaced a more human enquiry into *how* she was coping. As a result, the experience of absence deepened rather than alleviated her sense of isolation.

These narratives reveal absence as a form of silent communication, a bodily and emotional signal that something within the student's experience of WBL has become unmanageable. Rather than indicating a lack of discipline, absence in these cases reflects an effort to 'survive' within systems that are sometimes not equipped to accommodate vulnerability. The following theme elaborates how such withdrawal can also arise from relational insecurity and poor treatment in the workplace.

### **Insecurity and poor treatment at placement**

Another recurring source of absence stemmed from students' experiences of discomfort or a lack of safety within the workplace. In these accounts, the act of

staying away from WBL emerged as a response to relational and emotional insecurity. Students' narratives suggest that when the workplace was perceived as unwelcoming or even threatening, absence became a form of self-protection. Alex (NR) described how an early placement had triggered intense discomfort, 'I went there once first. I couldn't handle it, so I went home at lunch. Then I just didn't go back for several days. I went again once but felt I couldn't be there, so I stopped completely.' Later in the same interview, Alex explained the underlying cause of this reaction, 'It was only men working there. That made me feel uncomfortable. So I just didn't go.' Her withdrawal represents an act of psychological preservation rather than disinterest. She did not refuse to learn but rejected an environment that made her feel unsafe. The same student noted that the school was aware of her absence but failed to follow up in any meaningful way, 'They saw that I wasn't going, but it was never really followed up. There were weeks when I was just at home doing nothing.' This lack of support from school staff transformed a disengagement into prolonged isolation.

A comparable pattern appeared in another interview, where Tess (HC) recounted terminating her WBL after feeling mistreated and unsupported by her supervisor, 'I had a placement in the beginning, but I quit because it wasn't good. My teacher said that as long as you don't feel safe you can stop and stay with me (at school) instead.' Tess explained that she and a classmate had shared the placement. Yet their supervisor was inattentive and dismissive, 'She wasn't engaged, she didn't even check our attendance app, she had no idea. There were also very unpleasant tones.' These remarks expose a dynamic in which poor communication and lack of care produced withdrawal rather than learning. In this context, the teacher's authorisation to leave, while protective, also signals a system that reacts to crises rather than preventing them.

These accounts show absence as a rational response to environments that fail to safeguard emotional or interpersonal wellbeing. Students' decisions to withdraw reflect an attempt to reclaim agency in situations where their role as learners has been replaced by that of unwelcome intruders or 'cheap labour'. The notion of 'poor treatment' thus extends beyond individual rudeness. It speaks to an asymmetry of power, in which students occupy a vulnerable position without adequate adult advocacy. These accounts also highlight the intersection between psychological safety and educational belonging. When WBL settings fail to provide safety, absence can signal that students feel unseen or unsupported.

### **Low motivation and perceived meaninglessness**

Beyond experiences of psychological strain or insecurity, many students described their absence as rooted in a more subtle sense of pointlessness. In these narratives, WBL was not experienced as threatening, but as empty and lacking in learning value and relevance. A persistent theme across interviews was the

difficulty of sustaining motivation when WBL felt disconnected from the students' future goals or when they were positioned as 'unpaid helpers' rather than learners. Felix (HT) reflected candidly, 'I had a lot of absence at all placements. It's just hard to go there. When it feels pointless, when I get nothing out of it, it just feels like a waste of time.' His words capture emotional depletion tied not only to fatigue but to a lack of perceived learning. He elaborated that tasks often consisted of repetitive work, checking deliveries or cleaning, while feedback was minimal.

You can do a lot of things, but it's expected of you as a student. You never get any proper feedback. In school, if you work hard, you get a grade or some recognition. Here, it's just 'good job,' nothing more. (Felix, HT)

The result was gradual disengagement, not going became a silent critique of an educational structure that offered placement without acknowledgement. A similar experience was described by Leah (HS), 'I was at a day centre for elderly people. I didn't get to do anything, I just sat and watched TV with them. So I rarely went because it was so boring. I failed that one.' Her absence was not prompted by conflict but by monotony, an absence of stimulation or progression that eroded her sense of agency. In both cases, absence shows that something has gone wrong in the learning process. When the work ceases to teach, the learner ceases to attend. Several other students echoed this theme of demotivation, connecting it explicitly to the perceived futility of WBL. Noel (HPM) expressed frustration with the lack of tangible reward or recognition, 'Some days you just don't want to go to work. I don't have that drive that says, "if you do this, you'll get your pay at the end of the month." [...] what's the point?' His rhetorical question reflects a broader sentiment that the institutional framing of WBL undervalues students' labour and, by extension, their learning. When effort yields neither economic nor educational reward, attendance becomes difficult to justify.

In these accounts, students were absent not because they did not care, but because WBL had lost meaning for them. Students were not refusing to learn. They were articulating, through withdrawal, that their placements failed to provide learning in a meaningful sense. The monotony, lack of feedback, and absence of purpose collectively undermined their capacity to invest in WBL. These narratives suggest that the pedagogical power of WBL depends less on its resemblance to 'real work' and more on whether students perceive it as educationally significant. When workplaces rely on students as extra labour rather than as novices entitled to supervision, motivation erodes. Absence can here be understood as a quiet form of protest, expressing what students may find difficult to say within WBL.

### **Practical and physical barriers**

While most accounts of absence were emotionally or socially or pedagogical grounded, a smaller group of students pointed to practical and physical barriers that disrupted attendance. In these accounts, absence arose from logistical difficulties, long commutes, illness, unclear instructions, or temporary loss of placement, rather than from lack of motivation or wellbeing. Even such 'neutral' explanations reveal how institutional inflexibility can amplify vulnerability.

Johanna (NR) explained that geographical distance often made attendance exhausting, 'Since I live quite far away, the best thing is when they [school] try to find placements, so I don't have to travel three hours to get there.' Her statement captures the material dimension of absence. When attending WBL demands hours of travel, students' energy become stretched thin. The expectation of regular presence under such conditions risks excluding those whose everyday lives are already precarious. Another example appears in the interview with Nathalie (NR), where she described how a simple misunderstanding about workplace rules led to several weeks without a placement, 'I was told I could wear a hat and headphones, but when I came they said I couldn't. Then it just didn't work out, and I had to wait three weeks for a new placement.' The student spent this period completing written school tasks instead, a temporary solution that nonetheless disrupted the continuity of her vocational learning. Similarly, illness could easily result in unplanned absence that the system was ill-prepared to accommodate. Chloé (HT) noted, 'I was sick the last weeks and it kind of felt like I was done there.' What might appear a minor episode of absence in administrative terms marked, for the student, an abrupt and premature ending of a learning experience.

These cases demonstrate that even seemingly straightforward absences, caused by illness, distance, or organisational gaps, reflect broader structural fragilities in how participation is managed. When placements are geographically distant or poorly coordinated, students shoulder the burden of adaptation. Their physical presence becomes contingent on workplaces flexibility. Thus, absence here signals not individual failure but the systemic vulnerability that relies on the goodwill of multiple actors without caring for the student's continuity.

### **Reflexive synthesis**

Absence emerges as a relational and communicative response to conditions that undermine participation in WBL. Rather than indicating individual failure, it reflects disconnection from environments that do not provide sufficient safety, meaning, or support. For some students, absence was linked to psychological strain. For others, it arose from relational insecurity, lack of pedagogical purpose, or structural / organisational barriers that disrupted continuity. These findings illustrate that participation in WBL depends on more than physical presence. It

is shaped by whether students experience the workplace as a good environment that supports their learning and acknowledges their vulnerabilities. When such conditions are lacking, absence can be understood as an outcome of these circumstances rather than as a disciplinary issue. This perspective may reframe absence in VET from an individual deficit to an indicator of relational and pedagogical conditions. Absence may therefore become a potential source of insight into how WBL arrangements function.

## Discussion

This article focuses on students who experience difficulties in WBL and/or in their vocational subjects for a range of reasons and examines how they make sense of their absence from WBL. These difficulties are not understood as being solely linked to formal diagnoses, but rather as situated experiences that emerge in the interaction between individual conditions and the pedagogical, relational, and organisational contexts of VET. Rather than framing these students as individually deficient, the analysis highlights how existing support structures fail to accommodate vulnerability in WBL. Withdrawal appeared not as indifference but as a situated response to conditions that restricted their possibilities for meaningful participation. Because the participants were students for whom WBL was already fragile, their narratives illuminate the points at which vocational learning environments fail to support continuity and pedagogical purpose. Existing studies often treat absenteeism as an administrative or behavioural problem. By foregrounding students who already encountered difficulties in vocational subjects, the present study addresses this gap and offers a nuanced account of how absence becomes meaningful within WBL.

Students' descriptions of psychological strain illustrate how emotional well-being shapes the very possibility of participating as newcomers in WBL. Within CoP, early participation depends on having a recognised role that enables newcomers to begin engaging and negotiating identity (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). For students who described overwhelming anxiety or exhaustion, these emotional states disrupted the stability required for such involvement. This confirms earlier research linking mental health difficulties to disengagement (Böhn & Deutscher, 2022; Vanneste et al., 2017) while extending it by showing how emotional overload undermines not only motivation but the relational conditions that make early participation legitimate. These students were unable to appear as subjects because the environment implicitly demanded a composed, 'fully functional' self (cf. Biesta, 2022). Their withdrawal therefore signals a collapse of the conditions for subjectification.

Experiences of insecurity and poor treatment similarly reveal the relational fragility of WBL. Prior studies have shown that disrespect, lack of supervision, and exclusion contribute to dropout and disengagement (Dagsland et al., 2015; Snell & Hart, 2008). The present findings deepen this by showing how such encounters erode the recognition that the theory of CoP identifies as central to learning. When students felt ignored or treated with hostility, their role as legitimate participants was compromised, and absence became a protective response rather than a failure of commitment. Biesta's notion of socialisation sheds further light. WBL is intended to induct students into professional norms, yet when these norms include indifference, sexism, or disrespect, socialisation becomes ethically troubling. Withdrawal thus expresses a refusal to internalise practices that threaten one's dignity, an aspect rarely emphasised in existing research.

Experiences of meaninglessness further highlight how pedagogical conditions shape students' willingness to remain engaged. Students described repetitive or marginal tasks that lacked developmental value, echoing research on the demotivating effects of limited task variation and insufficient feedback (Nielsen, 2016; Wyszynska Johansson, 2021). The present findings add theoretical nuance by showing that such conditions restrict access to core practices essential for vocational identity development (cf. Fuller & Unwin, 2003). Without meaningful engagement, students' trajectories stagnated, and absence may become an identity-based critique of the version of the vocation that the workplace presented. Biesta's (2022) qualification domain is also relevant here. When WBL fails to provide valued learning opportunities, participation loses its educational significance. Absence then becomes a response to environments that fall short across qualification, socialisation, and subjectification.

Practical and structural barriers, such as long commutes, gaps between placements, or unclear expectations, also contributed to absence. Prior work has shown that organisational conditions and discontinuities between school and workplace can undermine attendance and participation (Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2011; Mårtensson, 2020). This study extends such findings by demonstrating how these disruptions erode forms of coherence that the theory of CoP regards as vital for progressing towards fuller participation. From Biesta's perspective, these structural breaks diminish the stability needed for qualification, the continuity required for socialisation, and the autonomy central to subjectification. Even seemingly neutral absences therefore reflect relational and structural failures rather than individual shortcomings.

Findings of the present study point to several ways in which the field may be advanced. They show that absence in WBL is not merely a precursor to dropout nor solely an outcome of poor supervision (cf. Snell & Hart, 2008), but a form of relational communication that reveals when participation has become untenable.

The study also integrates psychological, relational, and organisational explanations and demonstrates how these interact in students' experiences. Last, the contribution of the combined use of CoP and Biesta's educational theory provides an understanding of VET and WBL as simultaneously social, pedagogical, and ethical. The theory of CoP clarifies how withdrawal marks a breakdown in the structures that support early participation, while Biesta shows how stepping back can also represent an attempt to preserve integrity when educational conditions fail to recognise vulnerability or agency. This allows absence to be interpreted both as a collapse of legitimate participation and as a response to harmful or unproductive WBL. Yet, both theoretical frameworks have limitations. The theory of CoP presumes relatively coherent and stable communities, whereas many students in this study encountered fragmented or weakly structured workplaces that offered limited opportunities for meaningful participation. Biesta's (2022) conceptualisation of subjectification provides fewer tools for analysing the material and organisational constraints that shape WBL. Acknowledging these limitations highlights the need for analytical approaches that recognise the unevenness of contemporary vocational learning environments.

By foregrounding students who struggled with WBL, the study highlights where VET systems are least stable. That is, where they are less able to accommodate vulnerability and provide conditions for meaningful participation. The students' accounts indicate that improving WBL requires attention not only to supervision and task design but to the emotional, relational, and structural conditions. Absence here becomes an indicator of how adequate VET supports young people to participate and appear as subjects within the world of work.

## Conclusion

This article has examined how vocational students who in different ways experienced WBL as challenging or found aspects of their vocational subjects difficult respond to challenges encountered during WBL. By foregrounding students' own accounts, the study has shown that absence is not simply a matter of individual deficit or lack of motivation. It instead constitutes a response to environments in which safety or pedagogical meaning has fractured. In the findings, absence emerged as an embodied signal that the social and organisational arrangements of WBL had ceased to support the student's capacity to learn or appear as a subject.

The analysis demonstrates that WBL participation is contingent on more than administrative placement or physical presence. Drawing on concepts from the theory of CoP (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), the findings reveal how students' learning trajectories relied on access to legitimate participation,

meaningful tasks, and supportive relationships to school and supervisors. When these elements were missing, whether due to emotional overload, insecurity, lack of pedagogical purpose, or structural gaps, students' withdrawal functioned as an indicator of restrictive learning environments rather than as a personal failure. Biesta's (2022) theory of educational purpose further showed how absence reflects breakdowns in qualification, socialisation, and subjectification. In several cases, withdrawal expressed not only vulnerability but an ethical refusal to be shaped by practices experienced as harmful or meaningless. This perspective advances existing research by reframing absence as a form of student voice, a communicative act through which students articulate the limits of their participation when their needs or wellbeing are not heard. While previous studies have linked attendance to supervision, motivation, or structural fit, few have analysed absence as a relational response on the conditions of VET and WBL.

This may have implications for how VET is organised and supported. If absence is to be addressed meaningfully, interventions must target not only students' behaviour but the things that shape their participation. Ensuring continuity between school and workplace, strengthening supervisory practices, attending to students' emotional wellbeing, and creating expansive learning environments are essential strategies for supporting sustained engagement. These findings may have different implications depending on the VET model. In school-based systems with shorter WBL placements ensuring continuity between school and workplace, and providing structured follow-up during placements can be particularly important. In workplace-dominant or apprenticeship systems, where participation is more sustained and embedded in employment relations, it may be more important to have recognition within workplace communities, and participatory structures that support students' voice over time. All the things although have importance across both models. Absence should not be understood as an individual deficit but as feedback on the relational and pedagogical quality of WBL. Understood this way, absence provides educators and policymakers with a valuable resource, revealing where WBL fails to offer conditions where students can learn and appear as responsible participants. Addressing this is therefore both a practical concern and an ethical consideration for VET systems committed to equity and learning.

### Note on contributor

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