

Article

“The Door You Can Walk Through to Society”: Social Inclusion and Belonging in Vocational Programmes for Immigrants

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Abstract

This article presents a qualitative, empirical study of two educational programmes for immigrants that integrate language instruction and vocational training. In the context of migration, social inclusion is often conceptualised as access to social capital. Proficiency in the national language is considered key for employment and fast integration into working life has become a primary goal in Swedish migration policies. This article examines the two programmes from the perspective of inclusion into an (imagined) future professional community of practice (CoP), focusing specifically on the participants' possibilities to invest in a professional linguistic repertoire. The article is dedicated to empirical analyses and positive factors, recognising the need for research. Data consists of interviews with students and teachers, observations, and video recordings of course activities. Organisational aspects of the courses, such as the teachers' backgrounds and the courses' proximity to future CoPs, as well as relational aspects of the learning environments, are considered essential for the participants' inclusion in a future professional CoP. Analyses of the programmes' content demonstrate that participants are assumed to lack context-specific, vocational knowledge, including professionally related vocabulary. The article contributes to knowledge on how inclusion can be managed in practice in educational settings for adult immigrants and promotes an understanding of how vocationally adapted courses can assist immigrants in becoming members of a future professional CoP.

Keywords

adult learning; community of practice; inclusion; migration; second language learning

Issue

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1. Introduction

Language learning is considered a strong marker of integration. Language competence plays a crucial role in EU migration policies (Wodak & Boukala, 2015) and political discourses construct language as key for employment, education, and welfare (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2021). Sweden has a rather long tradition of immigration, with a notable peak during the years 2015 and 2016, when a large number of refugees sought asylum. The increasing number of newly arrived migrants has given adult education a more important role in the integration of migrants into the labour market (SOU, 2018, p. 71).

Even if the number is expected to decrease due to stricter migration policies (Swedish Migration Agency, 2023), there is still a significant need for measures aimed at enhancing the integration of immigrants. Rapid integration into working life is the primary goal of state-sponsored language education for immigrants (Swedish for Immigrants). The shifting focus in migration policies, transitioning from an emphasis on citizenship and integration to prioritising swift entry into the job market, has resulted in a notable increase in vocationally tailored language courses for migrants. These include “fast tracks” and other specialized courses designed for specific professions (Ennerberg, 2022). However,

while these courses are considered rather successful in terms of improving employment rates, at least regarding well-educated migrants (Joyce, 2019), there are few qualitative research studies on this type of educational context. Knowledge is lacking regarding how language instruction is vocationally adapted in practice or how participants are supported regarding more social values, such as social inclusion into different professional communities. According to Osman et al. (2022), vocational institutions are the primary sites where the educational and professional experiences of foreign-born immigrants are recognised and they thus function as important arenas for social inclusion (or exclusion) of migrants and refugees. It is important that providers of educational programmes and other actors in the field are aware of social inclusion (or exclusion) and practices that encourage it.

This article presents an empirical study of two courses that aim to support participants in entering the Swedish job market: a vocationally adapted language course for medical doctors and other healthcare workers (referred to as the medical course) and a course aimed at integrating participants into a future career in outdoor maintenance (referred to as the green course). The study aims to examine these courses from the perspective of inclusion into an imagined future professional community of practice (CoP; Wenger, 1998) by analysing course content and the knowledge that participants are assumed to need in preparation for working life in Sweden. We also analyse what factors may be beneficial for participants' inclusion into the future professional CoPs, focusing particularly on investment in a professional linguistic repertoire. The article is devoted to empirical analyses and positive factors, recognising the need for research.

The article is structured as follows. First, we provide an overview of research studies on language courses for immigrants in relation to integration and inclusion (Section 2), followed by theoretical considerations regarding the social situatedness of second language (L2) learning, and the framework of CoP (Section 3). Next, we present the studied courses along with an overview of the collected data (Section 4). In the results section (Section 5), we examine the content of the two courses and analyse organisational aspects of the courses, such as the teachers' background and the courses' proximity to future CoPs, as well as relational aspects of the learning environments that may be beneficial for participants' inclusion into future CoPs. Finally, we summarise and discuss our findings (Section 6).

2. Previous Studies of Language Courses and Inclusion

The objectives of courses in Swedish for immigrants have varied between different, sometimes contradictory goals concerning integration and employment (see, for example, Carlson, 2002). As noted, the primary goal of today's courses is labour market integration (Dahlstedt &

Fejes, 2021; Ennerberg, 2022; Joyce, 2019; Rydell, 2018). The employment rate among labour migrants is high (Joyce, 2019), which is to be expected since access to work is their primary motivation for migration. However, the process of labour market integration of refugees is rather slow, particularly for refugees with lower levels of education. A study by Joyce (2019) demonstrates that it is easier for migrants with higher education to find employment, but often below their qualification level, due to several obstacles such as lack of language skills, limited social networks, and discrimination. One group of migrants that experience these barriers consists of medical doctors who are educated outside the EU/EEA, who perceive that their education is being undervalued compared to medical doctors trained within Sweden (Sturesson et al., 2019).

Lack of language skills is considered an obstacle to employment even when a migrant has an academic education (cf. Joyce, 2019; Kerekes et al., 2013), and migrants themselves often describe skills in the language of the new country as a door or a key to society and further studies (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2021). A similar, instrumental notion of inclusion is demonstrated to be present in a course type targeting migrants in the resident permit application process (known as Swedish From Day 1). Participants in these courses are constructed as lacking specific knowledge and skills necessary for the Swedish labour market, but also as having knowledge that must be improved to secure employment (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017). Del Percio (2018, p. 239) argues that job-seeking migrants need to create a "desirable self," and that language proficiency has a high symbolic value in this creation. The strong focus on labour market integration positions citizens as responsible for their own employment, with less emphasis on structural inequalities in the labour market (cf. Fejes, 2010).

Previous studies have further demonstrated that language courses alone are not enough to support immigrants' entry into working life, and more tailored support is needed (Kehoe, 2017). An example consists of the increasing number of "fast track" courses, which lately have become rather successful in terms of employment from a (national) economic perspective (Joyce, 2019). However, regarding more social values the picture becomes more complex (cf. Ennerberg, 2022; Sturesson et al., 2019), and while vocationally adapted language courses appear to enhance employability prospects for immigrants, this does not necessarily equate to them feeling included as full members of that professional CoP, considering, for instance, the type of discrimination of foreign medical doctors reported by Sturesson et al. (2019).

From an individual perspective, migration often leads to questioning one's identity, including professional identity, and many immigrants feel that their previous experiences and knowledge have lost their value (Carlson, 2002; Sturesson et al., 2019; Wolanik Boström & Öhlander, 2012). There is a need for greater adaptation

in relation to the students' diverse backgrounds and needs (Swedish School Inspectorate, 2018, 2023), as well as a need for a greater understanding of the actual linguistic competence required. Lindberg and Sandwall (2012) argue that there is a risk that vocational-related language skills are prioritised at the expense of solid, basic general language skills required for participation in society, particularly if the courses focus primarily on vocabulary. Internships can decrease this risk, provided there are opportunities for interaction at the workplace and resonance between the language course and the workplace (Sunj, 2017). However, these criteria are often lacking (Sandwall, 2013; Swedish School Inspectorate, 2018).

Other studies have reported that the courses for immigrants have social benefits in their own right, as they provide opportunities to meet others and receive support from both peers and the teacher (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2020). Vocationally adapted language courses can further assist the participants in building networks and reflecting on previous knowledge (cf. Ennerberg, 2022) that may contribute to inclusion in a future professional community. Högberg et al. (2020) study language introduction programmes for newly arrived immigrants and report that teachers in this type of course often feel like they are doing something "other" and "more" than teachers in the regular school system. The differences are connected to the relational aspect, which includes acknowledging the students' situation and perspectives. Regarding the possibilities of achieving employment in the new country, Lønsmann (2022) observes how teachers have a key task in navigating participants between empowerment and marginalisation.

3. Inclusion Into a Community of Practice

Previously, much attention has been paid to individual factors in understanding language learning, such as age, learning strategies, language aptitude, attitudes, and motivation (Ellis, 1985; Gass & Selinker, 2001). Lately, more interest is paid to sociocultural factors, such as the opportunity to use the new language in working life. Language learning takes place through interaction (Firth & Wagner, 1997, 2007), and, consequently, motivation to learn a new language is considered not only an individual phenomenon but also a social process that is created in interaction with others. Drawing on Bourdieu, Darvin and Norton (2017) argue that learners invest in an L2 because they hope that it provides a wider range of material and symbolic resources that will increase their social power. Likewise, if learners are marginalised, or feel marginalised, they may not invest in practising the language in these contexts, even though they are otherwise highly motivated. In this sense, motivation could be described as a reciprocal process that is created in interaction.

In an educational context, motivation is enhanced by inclusive education and authentic learning activities

(García, 2009). Inclusive education could be defined as "actions and practices that embrace diversity and build a sense of belonging, rooted in the belief that every person has value and potential and should be respected" (UNESCO, 2020, p. 419). A teacher's ability to relate to the students, interact with them, and acknowledge them is creating a positive and inclusive learning environment (Cummins, 2000). Related to inclusive education is the adaptation of instruction to the students' pre-conditions, needs, and goals, which is considered crucial and stipulated in curricula and syllabi in Swedish educational contexts (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2022). However, education for adult immigrants is often criticised for not being adequately adapted to students' needs and goals, making it less relevant to them (Swedish School Inspectorate, 2018, 2023).

Social inclusion has often been described as access to social capital, involving social networks and institutions that facilitate access to power and influence (Yates, 2011). Correspondingly, the role of vocational education and training for migrants, Osman et al. (2022, p. 192) argue, is to provide refugees and migrants with opportunities to access resources associated with the language and the logic of the vocation and the professional community. According to the social participation metaphor, however, inclusion is rather a process of being welcomed as a new member of society and being welcomed as a learner (Norton, 2000).

A theoretical framework focusing on the social situatedness of learning is Wenger's (1998) community of practice (CoP), which we use in this article to analyse how immigrant participants are learning together and engage in practices that are significant for their future working life. Significant for a CoP is that the members invest in a common interest or goal. A linguistic repertoire emerges within the community, consisting of a set of social practices shared by the members. To become a member, one must acquire that specific language, and to do so, a sense of belonging and identification as a member (by oneself and others) is crucial. The already-established members (called full members) contribute to the learning environment, and it is important they invite the new members (called legitimate peripheral members) to invest in the community (Wenger, 1998). Learning the language of the CoP is thus an investment in the process of becoming a full member. The participants in this study are not yet members of the professional CoPs they are aspiring to, but we analyse how they are involved in a process that prepares them to become a member and how the courses are supporting them in this process.

4. The Courses and the Collected Data

The two studied courses target different groups in terms of their previous education and future profession. The green course is a collaboration between the public employment service and a private company in the service sector, specially focusing on the maintenance

of public areas. The objective of this nine-month long course is to educate unemployed individuals in a profession that is currently facing a shortage of workers. Of the five participants, three are immigrants, and they are also enrolled in external Swedish language courses (Swedish for Immigrants) alongside the green course. At the end of our data collection, the participants worked extra hours for the company, which suggests that they are already in the process of becoming legitimate members in a professional CoP. Within the company, their responsibilities include tasks such as trimming lawns, pruning trees, and cleaning streets from leaves and snow.

The medical course is intended for healthcare professionals who have migrated to Sweden and hold degrees from non-EU/EEA countries but have not yet obtained a Swedish licence to practice. According to the Swedish Medical Association (2023), this licence can be acquired through three routes: (a) completion of a national test assessing theoretical and practical proficiency meeting the requirements for Swedish licensure, demonstration of proficiency in Swedish and Swedish constitution, and completion of practical service; (b) completion of a “fast track” complementary program intended for students who have passed the theoretical component of the national test alongside a higher level of Swedish language proficiency; and (c) Swedish medical training at a university (possibly with a shortened study duration after credit transfer). The medical course under study is intended for medical doctors aiming for the first route, or possibly the second route. It is also open for other healthcare professionals such as nurses or pharmacists. The objective of the one-year long course is to prepare participants for the national test. It encompasses both general Swedish and vocational-specific Swedish language training as well as internship, and shares as such similarities with vocational “fast track” complementary programmes, which have been studied in the Swedish context by, for example, Ennerberg (2022). However, the course is not organised by a higher education institution but is offered by a Swedish municipality in collaboration with a local hospital. Participants in the course have professional backgrounds in the healthcare sector in their respective home countries. Nevertheless, they could not be regarded as legitimate members of CoPs in Sweden as they have not yet gained a Swedish licensure to practice.

As mentioned above, highly educated individuals generally have good opportunities to secure employment after completing supplementary education, although often at a level below their qualifications, while immigrants with lower levels of education, such as the participants in the green course, more often encounter difficulties in finding employment (Joyce, 2019). Data regarding the participants’ success rate in entering the job market after completing the courses is unfortunately unavailable. In the case of the green course though, course participants from previous years were offered employment by the company. The company also expressed interest in potentially employing two or three

participants from the current course.

Our data consists of six semi-structured interviews with two participants from each course and three teachers. The interviews encompass topics such as the content of the courses, types of learning activities, the roles of the teachers, as well as the interviewees’ experiences and views on the courses. The data also includes observations of four days for each course, video-recorded classroom activities, and outdoor activities in the green course showing participants’ opportunities to invest in a professional register and vocational knowledge. However, this article does not cover observations of the internship (medical course), the extra work hours at the outdoor maintenance company, or the municipality’s language courses that the participants attended alongside the vocationally adapted courses. Data collection took place during the years 2020 and 2021. The recordings were transcribed in broad transcription and analysed through a qualitative, inductive method (Bryman & Burgess, 1994), i.e., a detailed and iterative analysis where recurring themes and patterns related to our purpose were identified. The examples in the following sections were singled out because they are representative and illustrate patterns frequently observed in the data. A content-based translation is applied, which means that frequently occurring typical L2 structures are lost in translation. We combine analyses of observations and recorded classroom interaction with interview data to obtain a broad understanding of how the participants are provided opportunities for inclusion in future professional CoPs. The article thus belongs to the category of qualitative studies that focus on a variety of aspects influencing inclusion in working life and the role that education plays or could play (see Moreno Herrera et al., 2022).

5. Results

In the first two sections, we examine the content of the medical course (5.1) and the green course (5.2) with a focus on the knowledge that participants are assumed to lack in order to become members of future professional CoPs. The interviews serve as a starting point and we add examples from our observations. We continue by examining what aspects of the organisation of the courses (5.3), and the social and relational factors (5.4), that may be beneficial to the participants’ sense of belonging and their process of becoming a member of future CoPs.

5.1. Vocational Knowledge for Inclusion: Medical Course

As noted, the medical course aims to prepare the participants for the national proficiency test which is required for obtaining a Swedish licence. In the interview, one of the participants simply states that “you learn Swedish healthcare” at the course and exemplifies with the need to learn policies for the prescription of medicine, particularly the comparably strict policies for the prescription of antibiotics. According to the two teachers, it is

first and foremost important that participants learn the organisational structures of Swedish healthcare, including primary care and specialised care, but also the system of clinics for different diseases and the comparably high medical expertise of ambulance healthcare. They also need to understand power relations within Swedish healthcare and the importance of teamwork between nurses and doctors. Power in relation to the patients is also discussed, and, as demonstrated in Excerpt 1, compared to doctor–patient relations in other countries. The example illustrates how participants, through their basic education and experiences abroad, are assumed to have a different understanding of how the relationship with the patient should be. This needs to be adjusted for them to function well in the Swedish context.

Excerpt 1—Power relations in Swedish healthcare (interview)

Teacher 1: In Sweden, people tend to be quite natural with each other, including doctors and patients, and this differs between countries, culturally. In other countries, doctors hold a position of power, and patients may feel intimidated and do as they are told. This is also a topic of discussion [in the course].

A recurring learning activity in the course is to read and talk about earlier questions from the national tests assessing theoretical and practical proficiency meeting the requirements for Swedish licensure. We observe how the teacher combines the reading test activity with vocabulary training and how to talk to patients, so they understand. Excerpt 2 demonstrates a sequence in which the teacher asks if the participants understand all the words in a test question, then gives a synonym for a medical term to use in interaction with patients.

Excerpt 2—Words to use with patients (video recording of classroom interaction)

Teacher 2: Do you understand all the examinations here? Computer tomography—x-ray is a better word to use with the patients. You slice up the body like a loaf of bread, just like we did with the sponge cake here, if you explain it to a patient. Sputum samples—in Swedish we call that an expectoration test: “I want you to spit in this cup.”

As illustrated in Excerpt 2, the teacher highlights a phrase that patients might find difficult (“computer tomography”) and gives a suggestion of a synonym (“x-ray”) for the word to use with patients. The teacher is thereby preparing the participants for the test but also guiding them in the linguistic register of the future CoP and the everyday equivalents to use with patients. He further explains the actual procedure in everyday language (“you slice up the body like a loaf of bread”), and even compares the practice with the slicing of a sponge cake

they just ate in class. The interviewed participants, in turn, refer to the two varieties as “medical Swedish” and “Swedish,” or “academic Swedish” and “everyday Swedish.” One of them admits that everyday Swedish can be quite difficult to understand. During their internship, he learned that older people especially “can speak with a strong dialect and use old words for diseases,” which he says can be challenging to comprehend. Knowledge of everyday language is further framed as essential for informal conversations with colleagues during breaks, as described in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3—“It’s easy to talk about everything” (interview)

Participant: Before the internship, I had difficulties speaking with other doctors about anything other than occupational therapy. Formal language use was easier. But after the internship, I noticed that it’s easy to talk about everything.

The teachers have also observed these challenges, and to feel comfortable conversing in the lunchroom during an internship, students must speak Swedish at a rather high level before going out on internship, they claim. This indicates that the observed teachers are aware of the need for a broad linguistic repertoire to function in the Swedish healthcare system and to become a legitimate member of a future professional CoP. While the course aims to prepare participants for the national test, teachers also incorporate knowledge that can benefit participants in their future professional lives and help them feel comfortable at work. As such, the reading test activity is not only aimed at preparing participants for the test, which suggests a rather instrumental notion of language learning, but also for inclusion into a future professional community and its vocabulary.

In sum, the learning activities at the medical course centres around earlier national proficiency tests, and the participants are introduced to the Swedish healthcare organisation, power relations between doctors and nurses, and the importance of teamwork, but also how to approach patients in a natural and informal manner. The Swedish alternative is directly or indirectly framed as positive or as having a high standard. Familiarity with similar values and attitudes characteristic of future professional CoPs are likely to be advantageous for the participants’ integration into the Swedish job market over time.

5.2. Vocational Knowledge for Inclusion: Green Course

The green course is designed to teach participants how to create and maintain beautiful and functional outdoor environments. The teacher explains that she had the freedom to design and plan the course content and decided to base it on the requirements of the national certificate in green area maintenance that otherwise is provided by institutions for upper secondary education.

The participants primarily learn how to maintain and care for outdoor areas in public spaces, including lawns in parks, planted trees, and flowerbeds, as well as how to use necessary tools. They are also introduced to safety routines, which are treated as new knowledge to the participants. The routines are not presented as being specific to Sweden, but in practice, they comply with Swedish legislation. They learn during practice rather than through theory and the course is first and foremost spent outdoors. Learning activities are based on group work, and the teacher believes that language is best acquired via social activities and teamwork. In contrast to the healthcare workers, participants are not assumed to have any professional knowledge at the beginning of the course. However, they may have previous experience or interest in gardening or agriculture that was acquired outside of a professional CoP before migration.

Observations of the learning activities demonstrate that vocabulary for plants, specialised machines, and routines for outdoor maintenance is treated as unknown to the participants and something they must learn. Language-related questions pertain to nouns and the teacher employs pictures to explain their meaning, or uses embodied resources to indicate a flower or demonstrate how to use a machine. For example, “armoured grass” (referring to a type of grass reinforced with a bucking material) is explained with a picture and contextualised as in Excerpt 4. When explaining both the meaning of the phrase and how the surface should be maintained, she is adding vocational knowledge specific to a city maintenance worker.

Excerpt 4—Armoured grass (fieldnotes of interaction)

Teacher: There’s armoured grass in this city district. Do you know what that is?

Participants: (silence)

Teacher: (shows picture of armoured grass via a power point projector) It’s a surface that is mowed with a lawnmower. We often have it at edges with corners, where we place reinforcement in the grass.

Reading maps in Swedish is another necessary skill. This is indirectly trained in the course, as participants are expected to be able to identify different districts in the city, including their names and spatial extent. They also need to be able to communicate effectively with city residents, such as informing them about noise-making work. For this task, they need a broad linguistic repertoire, although limited to specific situations. However, everyday language use, including vocabulary, is not explicitly trained, nor is it treated as unknown to the participants in the course.

In sum, the participants learn through practical, hands-on experience rather than through theoretical instruction. There is no direct focus on test activities,

but participants are assumed to lack knowledge on how to create and maintain beautiful and functional outdoor environments, and learning activities are designed as group work tasks. As individuals, they must be able to read maps and work instructions, communicate with colleagues, and sometimes also with inhabitants of the city. Only vocational skills and professional terms (mostly nouns) are treated as unknown to the participants. Very little of what needs to be learned is specific to Swedish society; instead, the focus is on seasons and climate, and the local company’s routines. As such, participants are first and foremost trained for inclusion into professional CoPs of the local company, even though the acquired knowledge and skills are rather easily transferrable to other companies and CoPs within the profession of gardening and outdoor maintenance.

5.3. Structures Supporting Membership and Sense of Belonging

In this section, we examine organisational aspects of the courses that contribute to creating an authentic learning environment beneficial to the participants’ sense of belonging to a future, professional CoP. Three themes are identified: the professional skills of the teachers; the proximity to a future professional CoP; and the teachers’ adaptation of the courses to participants’ preconditions and needs.

The professional skills and the vocational knowledge of the teachers provide both legitimacy and authenticity to the courses. The teacher of the green course is trained in green area maintenance and works side by side with the participants during the manual work. Similarly, the two teachers of the medical course work part-time as nurses at the hospital and are, in this sense, active full members of a professional CoP. This adds to their legitimacy, as they can easily keep themselves up to date with the professional language and changes in the profession. They can also easily recognise participants’ vocational skills and adapt learning activities to their preconditions, needs, and goals. During a tree pruning activity in the green course, for example, the teacher asks a participant to help her, aware of his experience in pruning trees in his earlier homeland. When acknowledging his earlier skills as relevant to the profession, she invites him to invest in a professional social identity as a skilled maintenance worker in the Swedish context. The teachers in the medical course acknowledge that individualisation can be difficult in their course, as some of the participants are highly skilled professionals and are already full members of a professional CoP abroad. However, they are aware of the participants’ different professional specialisations and we observe how they, for instance, ask detailed questions in class to a cardiologist, helping the participant to invest in the professional repertoire of his or her specialisation.

The proximity to members of an existing professional CoP further contributes to creating an authentic

learning environment. In the medical course, this proximity comes from the internship, when participants are positioned as legitimate members of a future CoP. They shadow full members and get to know professionals within their own specialisation. The clothes and the nametag that health workers wear indicate their roles as colleagues. The closeness to future CoPs is further enhanced by the location of the teaching premises at the hospital, which provides legitimacy and adds authenticity to the learning environments. The course's location means that the participants are welcomed inside the hospital as legitimate visitors to the building. In the green course, participants are even welcome as new members of a professional CoP, as they are invited to work extra hours at the company. They wear their work clothes also during theory lessons and, for an external observer, it is impossible to differentiate between the course participants and the full members of the CoP. Participants must "successively go out with others," the teacher of the green course claims, which indicates a gradient movement from being a course participant towards already becoming a new member of the CoP during the course. This process is indeed supported by the proximity to the company. They have their classroom next door to the lunchroom at the maintenance company and regularly meet other employees.

The courses have no formal learning objectives and our analyses show that this is a circumstance that enhances the teachers' ability to create an authentic learning environment. The teachers have designed the courses based on their vocational competences and the individuals' preconditions and needs. The teacher in the green course describes this process in the interview (see Excerpt 5), explaining how she designed the course based on a combination of work tasks that were needed to be done in a city area and the individuals' preconditions:

Excerpt 5—"Fill in with what was there" (interview)

Teacher: Then we had [city area 3] and it was quite neglected, so there was a lot to practise on. I sensed the capacity that the participants brought with them. Many, for example, have worked on their farms, which is a huge experience and interest. We just had to fill in with what was there.

The professional experiences and skills of the teachers enable this type of adaptation and flexibility. As full members of professional CoPs, teachers possess the necessary knowledge and skills to adapt course content and learning activities to available learning materials, participants' preconditions, and their goal of becoming a legitimate member of a professional CoP in the future.

To summarise, the combination of the organisational aspects analysed in this section provides a foundation for an authentic learning environment that provides opportunities for inclusion in future CoPs. In particular, the fact

that the teachers are active professionals is highly beneficial from a CoP perspective, as they are proficient in the field and can encourage participants to invest in practices relevant to a future professional CoP, including a professional linguistic repertoire.

5.4. Building Social Relations for Inclusion

In this section, we analyse the courses from a social inclusion perspective. Specifically, we explore the informal aspects of the courses and analyse how they provide participants with opportunities for social inclusion into a professionally relevant social group during their education. We also consider whether the courses could be viewed as CoPs in their own right.

We start our analysis by presenting an example from an introduction round in the medical classroom. The participants are already acquainted, and the round is intended for us as observing researchers. During the round, a woman shares her name and profession and goes on to explain how the course has served as an eye-opener for her (Excerpt 6). Specifically, she now understands what type of knowledge and skills she needs to acquire to obtain a work licence in Sweden. Additionally, the course has given her access to a social group that provides her with positive energy to study.

Excerpt 6—Positive energy (video recording of classroom interaction)

Participant: I came here from [another city] and I studied a lot there, but I didn't know what to do. I received an assessment from the National Board of Health and Welfare, but I didn't know what to do. But [teacher's name] asked me, "how can I help you?" I said I want a plan for one year, what should I do this year? I now know that I have to study for the exam. I met other students who passed the test, so I got good energy and felt positive. I thought [the proficiency test] was impossible, that it was very difficult, but I saw other students who passed. I got a lot of positive energy; I want to study, I'm not alone, there are many of us. I come here every Friday and I just want to study and study.

The quote illustrates how motivation is not solely an internal drive or ability, but rather a result of the interplay between the individual and the social environment (cf. Darwin & Norton, 2017). It is evident that the vocational focus of the course provides participants with a shared goal, but the course also fosters a learning community by bringing together individuals with similar interests and needs. The similarities among the participants stem not only from a shared profession but also from a shared mindset. For example, a participant in the medical course mentions that the fast tempo of the course is appreciated, as all participants are used to studying hard for their medical studies. Similarly, the teacher in

the green course explains that several participants in her class are “doers” who are “used to putting in effort.” The potential to invest in learning vocational skills and repertoire is thus based not only on a shared future professional identity but also on other similarities among the participants, which are visible during the course.

Another factor contributing to a positive learning environment is the growing friendship among the participants. This theme is highlighted by one of the interviewees from the green course, where participants are spending ample time working, socialising, and speaking Swedish together. Excerpt 7 demonstrates the parallel between the vocational focus of the course, the development of friendship, and the potential for investment in a specialised language adapted to the practical and social demands of a future CoP.

Excerpt 7—“Before it was just trees” (interview)

Interviewer: Do you learn Swedish in the programme?

Participant: Absolutely. I have good friends. I learn very well.

Interviewer: When?

Participant: When we have a coffee break, when we talk. We work together and we talk. That word means this, and that word means that. We learn new words and names [of plants]. The tools I already know, but I learn about bushes and perennials. Before it was just trees, but now I know.

The role and position of teachers are crucial in the framework of inclusive education (Cummins, 2000). Teachers must interact with students as individual learners, building relationships with them and learning about their backgrounds and experiences. An interesting and somewhat surprising circumstance is that the green course teacher previously worked as a nurse. Her experiences from being a professional nurse have given her an understanding of human nature, including emotions and motivations, which she also finds useful in the vocationally oriented course. This indicates that personal characteristics, or even personality, also play a role, such as being able to show compassion or being eager to help.

As evidenced by prior studies (Högberg et al., 2020; Lønsmann, 2022), teachers in courses for immigrants take a position that extends beyond instruction and formal education. In both studied courses, the teachers offer guidance on matters that relate to life in Sweden more broadly, such as finding housing or managing bill payments. Furthermore, the teachers in the medical course frequently express solidarity with the participants’ situation, criticising the proficiency test for being unnecessarily difficult, or complaining about the time-consuming process of obtaining a Swedish licence.

Similar acts of solidarity led to reciprocity between the teacher and participants, where the latter were invited to take an equal position with the teacher. According to the teachers, they have made friends for life and still maintain contact with participants from earlier years. This type of relationship is possibly facilitated by the small size of the groups and the absence of formal exams and associated grading. In all, teachers are shifting between roles of being a colleague, a friend, and a compassionate teacher, but are also combining these roles to build meaningful relationships with the students as learners.

We conclude that the observed courses can be viewed as examples of CoPs in their own right. The participants come together for a shared goal and they can invest in a learner identity together with others. When being invited as legitimate members of the course community by the teachers and co-participants, they can also explore identities that go beyond the role of an L2 learner. Among these, the position of being a future colleague and/or a friend seems to be the most meaningful for investing in learning Swedish. As examples of CoPs in their own right, the courses are aligned with the participants’ future CoPs in the landscape of communities, which obviously is beneficial for the formation of a community within the course format, but also for the participants’ opportunities for inclusion in future professional CoP.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we have examined two vocationally adapted courses for immigrants from the perspective of inclusion into future professional CoPs. We have devoted the article to empirical analyses and highlighted aspects that may benefit participants’ inclusion into future CoPs, with a particular emphasis on the participants’ possibilities to invest in a professional linguistic repertoire. The analyses show that several of the aspects that are positive for participants’ inclusion, according to the theory of CoP and inclusive education, are apparent in both course contexts, despite their differences in terms of future professions. These similarities underline the significance of our findings and suggest that the beneficial factors have broader applicability.

The analysis of the courses’ content demonstrated a focus on vocational knowledge and skills required within the national context of Sweden. The absence of formal learning objectives is rather uncommon in the Swedish education system, which is otherwise highly influenced by neoliberal discourses and measurement of educational outcomes. However, the absence of formal learning objectives appears to have enhanced the teachers’ ability to create an authentic learning environment. It is the teachers’ professional knowledge and experiences that serve as the foundation of the content and allow for an adaptation to the needs of both groups and individuals. Group characteristics and the duration of the courses are other factors crucial for

understanding the potential for adaptation: The teachers work with relatively homogenous and small groups for nine to 12 months, which gives them time and opportunities to get to know the participants and their specific needs. Swedish language courses offered by municipalities (Swedish for Immigrants) also have a fairly broad description of the central course content but have faced criticism for their lack of adaptation (Swedish School Inspectorate, 2018, 2023). A conclusion drawn is that the studied courses are likely to benefit from having a clear goal focus, i.e., obtaining Swedish licensure for practice within the healthcare sector or a Swedish certificate in green area maintenance. The goal focus appears to both limit and concretise the content of the courses. However, the absence of learning objectives can also entail disadvantages, as is the case in all educational settings. One such drawback is that the system becomes reliant on the commitment and expertise of individual teachers, which can pose a risk if the educational provider fails to recruit teachers who are members of relevant professional CoPs.

Focusing on inclusion, we have demonstrated that the courses offer opportunities for social inclusion and belonging. They provide tools for inclusion in future professional CoPs, but the courses also function as CoPs in their own right. Inclusion is a prerequisite for investing in language learning (Darvin & Norton, 2017) and the role of compensatory and complementary training for immigrants is to provide refugees and migrants with opportunities to access resources associated with the language and the logic of the vocation (Osman et al., 2022). Having teachers who are full members of a relevant professional CoP stands out as particularly advantageous in achieving this goal. The teachers' ability to design authentic learning activities, drawing from their professional experiences and understanding of the demands of the current profession, alongside their compassionate teaching style, must be considered positive for the participants' possibility to invest in a linguistic repertoire and become legitimate members of future professional CoPs. Furthermore, the proximity of teaching premises to professional CoPs, as well as internships or additional work opportunities, offers participants a connection to the working life and a valuable network that immigrants often lack (cf. Joyce, 2019; Sturesson et al., 2019). Internships or relevant work opportunities not only give the potential for investing in a professional linguistic repertoire but also acknowledge the professional experiences and identities of foreign-born immigrants outside the educational context (Osman et al., 2022).

An observed difference between the two courses is that the medical course places a stronger emphasis on language training, treating Swedish as an object that participants must acquire and learn to use in diverse situations and with various types of interactants. While there is a focus on vocabulary, our analyses of course content have demonstrated the significance of possessing a broad linguistic repertoire for functioning in both

professional sectors, but especially the healthcare sector. This repertoire encompasses not only everyday language for communication with patients or city residents but also includes pronunciation and grammar as integral components. Writing within the future profession is notably absent in the courses, and reading is seldom trained in the green course. Participants are enrolled in Swedish for Immigrants courses to develop their proficiency in everyday Swedish. However, our study suggests that the studied courses could benefit from a higher resonance between the general courses and the vocationally adapted language course, a point also raised by Lindberg and Sandwall (2012). The numerous questions posed by participants, such as those related to bill payments, imply that they have yet to develop a broad linguistic repertoire for active participation in all areas of working life and society.

In conclusion, we have observed how the vocational focus of the language programmes benefits immigrant participants by bringing them together to pursue a shared goal, engage in authentic activities that are meaningful to them, and develop their learning identities in relation to their future working life, alongside individuals facing similar circumstances. Following the frameworks of inclusive education and CoP, we can assume that these factors contribute positively to the individuals' learning and inclusion. The overarching political objective of similar "fast track" complementary education programmes (cf. Ennerberg, 2022) is integration into the labour market, in the sense of getting employment, but vocationally adapted courses could themselves give participants values that are beneficial for social inclusion and a sense of belonging. The organisational aspects of the courses, including the teachers' backgrounds and the courses' proximity to future CoPs, as well as relational dynamics within the learning environments, emerge as particularly influential factors for inclusion. Nevertheless, our conclusion also highlights the need for more emphasis on explicit L2 instruction, including pronunciation and grammar, than what is currently observed in the two courses. A broad linguistic repertoire is necessary for navigating the future professional CoPs, but also beneficial for inclusion in broader society.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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