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**Vocational teachers in the face of a major educational reform: individual ways of negotiating professional identities**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines how vocational teachers negotiate their professional identity in the context of a major externally imposed curriculum reform. The focus is on the teachers' orientations towards the reform in its initial stage. Sixteen Finnish vocational teachers were interviewed using open-ended narrative interviews. The data were analysed in accordance with data-driven qualitative analysis methods. From the teachers' accounts three main orientations towards the reform were identified: a *resistant* orientation, an *inconsistent* orientation and an *approving* orientation, each based on the teachers' individual self-positioning towards the reform. Each orientation is illustrated using two narratives. The findings demonstrated that the teachers' orientations were shaped by their individual backgrounds, including their actual sense of their professional selves, their prior working experiences, and their expectations of their professional future. In addition, the teachers' orientations were shaped by their social affordances, and first and foremost by the practices and traditions of the vocational study programmes.

**Keywords:** Professional identity; vocational teacher; educational reform; identity negotiation

## **Introduction**

Continuous and rapid change is one of the most striking features of modern society and of work organisations. In Finland, too, the initial vocational education and training (VET) system is in a stage of transition. Initial VET was strongly school-based until 2001. Hence, vocational competencies and knowledge were mainly taught for students by teachers within the vocational schooling institutions. Since the transformation of VET in 2001, co-operation between vocational institutions and workplaces has increased, and vocational institutions have provided three-year study programmes in all fields leading to vocational qualifications. The qualifications include at least six months (20 credits out of 120 credits) for students' systematically guided and assessed workplace learning; this takes place in authentic work environments outside the schools. During the workplace learning periods, workers (called workplace trainers) guide students, so that they will learn the vocational skills and knowledge related to the goals set for these periods. In addition, teachers visit the workplaces, to participate in the guidance and evaluation for these periods. More recently, further changes and projects have been undertaken in the vocational institutions at local level, the aim being to increase the amount of students' workplace learning from the national minimum. This has been the case in the institution used in this study. Here, the revised vocational qualifications include 40–60 credits for students' workplace learning. As a result of the new directions in VET, the work of Finnish vocational teachers has changed. The amount of traditional teaching done by teachers in the schools has decreased, and teachers increasingly have to guide, evaluate, and carry out other duties related to students' workplace learning. This means that they have to go outside the vocational institutions much more, and to work closely with workplaces. In their movement back and forward on the boundaries of educational and working-life institutions, today's vocational teachers can be described as border-crossers (cf. Wenger 1998).

Educational reforms can be challenging for teachers, since they require a renegotiation of professional identity. Like other workers, teachers now need to have a highly dynamic and flexible work identity (du Gay 1996; Kirpal 2004). Operating within continuous educational changes, they need also to have adaptable disposition towards change, seeing it as normal, and as an opportunity rather than a problem (cf. Kirpal 2004; OECD 1989). Due to these general expectations, a person who does not want to adapt to changes can easily be labelled as a ‘stick-in-the-mud’ – someone who is change-resistant and opposed to development. Such labels can be applied without focusing on the reasons why a person disagrees with the changes in question. As a result, most workers have learned to talk about themselves using the vocabulary of self-management, of life-long learning, and of creative problem-solving (Isopahkala-Bouret 2005). Nobody wants to be labelled as old-fashioned or out-of-date.

In educational reform processes, teachers are in a crucial position, mediating between policy and practice. The implementation of any reform will remain superficial if teachers do not have any sense of ownership in it (Altrichter and Elliot 2000). In order to promote reforms successfully and to support teachers’ engagement with them, we should understand better how teachers experience reforms, and how they negotiate their professional identity in a reform context. Recent studies have addressed various aspects of teachers’ identities within the reform context: the teachers’ professional identity and emotions (Hargreaves 2005; Schmidt and Datnow 2005), their commitment (Day et al. 2005; Little and Barlett 2002), and their reactions to the reforms and strategies for adapting (Drake & Sherin, 2006; van Veen and Slegers 2006). However, studies of this kind have mostly focused on teachers in comprehensive schools, and on reforms involving teachers’ classroom practices and aiming at improving teaching methods. We thus need an understanding of vocational teachers’ professional identity negotiations when they confront reforms that increasingly require them to cross the boundaries between educational and working-life institutions.

This study aims to understand how vocational teachers negotiate their professional identity in response to an extensive, externally imposed curriculum reform. As a consequence of this reform, teachers increasingly need to work outside the school organisation and to co-operate with workplaces. In particular, they have more duties related to organising, guiding and evaluating students' workplace learning, and to guiding and training workplace trainers in order that the latter can support students' learning – all this because the students are now required to do more learning in the workplace itself. Utilising interview data consisting of teachers' own narratives and accounts, the study seeks to illustrate vocational teachers' orientations towards the reform in its initial stage. The study reported here is located within a subject-centred socio-cultural framework. We understand that professional identity negotiations take place in a close interplay between individual agency and the social suggestions of workplace practices (e.g. Billett and Somerville 2004; Kirpal 2004). The key work informing this study will be reviewed in the sections which follow.

***Professional identity negotiations as an interplay between individual agency and the social suggestions of workplace practices***

In a situation of educational change, the situational demands and expectations offered by reforms confront a teacher's actual professional identity describable as the life-history and experience-based sense of the subject's own professional orientations and commitments. Professional identity involves also the teacher's understanding of the goals and meaning of education as well as one's actual values, moral obligations, beliefs regarding teaching and learning, and orientations to the future (Beijaard et al. 2004; Little and Barlett 2002). One's identity as a teacher is partly given and partly achieved by an active positioning in social space (Coldron and Smith 1999). This means that professional identity is negotiated as part of a complex interdependence between the individual's intentionality, one's

commitments and values, and social suggestions – suggestions which include cultural norms, contextual practices and situational demands (Billett 2007; Kirpal 2004). The relational interdependence between the individual and social domains is continually being negotiated, and the relations between these constantly transformed (Billett 2007). Since the negotiation of professional identities takes place as an interplay between individual agency and the social suggestion of work practices, social suggestion alone is not sufficient to require the subject to enact the process of identity reformation and learning. That is, it is principally through the individual's active actions that identity is shaped and workplace practices are transformed (Billett and Somerville 2004; Eteläpelto and Saarinen 2006; Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004).

Professional identity negotiations are especially challenging in cases where workers have to negotiate about the boundaries of their work. Fenwick (2006) has found that boundaryless workers' identity negotiations are bound up with their efforts to understand the forces affecting their subjectivities, and their everyday activities and choices to inhabit a personally tolerable subject position. Thus, identity negotiation involves developing awareness of and strategies for constituting subjectivity, in ways that can ensure some sense of continuity, and that can avoid passive subjection.

Sfard and Prusak (2005) have illuminated the relationship between identity, context and learning. They assume that narrative identity is a missing link for understanding learning in socio-cultural contexts. Two subsets of significant narratives about the person can be distinguished, (i) actual identity – which involves factual assertions consisting of narratives about the actual state of affairs; (ii) designated identity – which consists of narratives presenting a state of affairs which is expected to be the case, and which expresses wishes and obligations that are thought to be becoming part of the person's identity. Learning is a primary means for realising the designed identity, since learning closes the gap between actual and designated identity. Working within the socio-cultural framework, Sfard

and Prusak (2005) understand learning as a socially situated and culturally shaped activity, one which is mediated through a socially constructed identity. Based on this framework, we could hypothesise that in the reform context, the teachers' actual identity is challenged, and that they need to construct a designated identity in relation to new situational demands. In addition to this, the teachers need to bridge the gap between the actual and designated identity, and this process represents their major challenge for professional learning in the reform context.

### ***Individuals' strategies and responses in the face of change***

Recently, many educational organisations have adopted managerial approaches, with reforms being introduced via top-down management edicts (Gleeson and Shain 1999; Vähäsantanen et al. 2008). Thus, reforms can be viewed by teachers as something done to them, as opposed to something done in partnership with them (Buck 2005). However, individuals adopt a variety of strategies in their professional identity negotiations, and they respond individually to changes. Thus, individuals cannot be merely viewed as being subjected to social suggestions.

Kirpal (2004) has found that workers have different resources with which to negotiate their identities and responses to changes. Various forms of identification (with *classical* and *flexible* as two poles of a continuum of possible responses to change) were identified. The employees with a classical type of identity typically pursued a kind of 'retreat strategy' by which they attempted to hold on to traditional elements of identification, while largely resisting changes. The changes often imposed conflict, since the workers did not have the personal resources to cope with the requirements of a quickly-changing work environment. This often led to stress, a lack of control over work performance, high levels of staff turnover and a lack of commitment. In contrast, the employees with the flexible identity were willing and able to actively change their current situation by accepting a higher degree of



flexibility and mobility. They were self-confident, possessing the skills to cope with changes (Kirpal 2004).

In the context of educational reforms, external and situational demands do not necessarily lead to individual transformation. Lasky (2005) found that the external reform might have less of an effect on shaping teacher-identity, since one of the most powerful and enduring elements of teachers' agency is their unwillingness to change their identity. Thus, before transformation can take place, teachers must be willing and able to change. Before adopting the reform, teachers must also make sense of it, interpret it, and find the reform to be meaningful (e.g. Drake and Sherin 2006). This kind of sense-making is not only a cognitive process, but also an emotional one (Geijsel and Meijers 2005). Reio (2005) has constructed a model of the influences of reforms. The model demonstrates that a reform influences teachers' identities directly, moderated or mediated by age, career stage or generation. Identity, in turn, influences one's emotional reactions to reform. Emotions then affect one's risk-taking behaviour as well as one's learning and development. Finally, learning and development directly influence teacher-identity.

Recent studies have found that there are individual differences in teachers' orientations towards the reforms in the comprehensive school system. These are related to the teachers' existing professional identity and orientations. van Veen and Slegers (2006) have found that teachers who experienced congruence between their actual professional orientations and a reform reacted positively, experiencing their professional identities as being reinforced. Their professional lives were enhanced, and they had feelings of happiness and satisfaction. By contrast, teachers who experienced incongruence with their existing professional orientations reacted more negatively, experiencing feelings of anxiety and guilt. Similarly, Muncey and McQuillan (1996) reported that those teachers who found that their ideologies were consistent with the reforms typically supported the changes that were introduced. Conversely,

resistance may result when teachers feel that their vested interests and beliefs are threatened by a reform (see Schmidt and Datnow 2005). Gleeson and Shain (1999), too, found that middle managers in further-education institutions responded in different ways to change, and adopted individual approaches of compliance (*willing, unwilling and strategic compliance*) depending on how they experienced the rapid change expectations, the new education ethos and the aspects of the new work culture in relation their individual values and views.

Another factor to consider is that teachers' beliefs about their subject matter can affect how they respond to changes (Spillane et al. 2002). In addition, recent studies suggest that teachers' prior experiences affect how they make sense of reforms. Teachers often approve of reforms that fit with their prior experiences, and they can resist reforms because they miss what is familiar to them (Goodson et al. 2006; Spillane et al. 2002). Hargreaves (2005) found that the willingness of teachers to accept educational reforms decreases with age and with teaching experience. Furthermore, Drake and Sherin (2006) found that each teacher had a distinctive pattern of adaptation to using a new curriculum. The patterns were related to three key aspects of the teachers' own experiences: their early memories of learning, their current perceptions of themselves as learners, and their interactions with family members.

Reforms may also lead to experiences of dissatisfaction with work, exhaust teachers' enthusiasm and erode their commitment (Day et al. 2005; Lasky 2005; Little and Bartlett 2002). Nevertheless, Billett and Pavlova (2005) emphasised that claims about changes in work leading to disempowerment, marginalisation and anxiety can be overstated. They found that changes can provide a vehicle by which workers can enact their preferences, gain greater security in their work, practise fulfilling and personally rewarding work, and direct their energies into projects that are closely associated with their identity.

### *Aims and research questions*

Many studies have focused on teachers and their experiences within reform contexts. However, there has been no detailed research on vocational teachers and how teachers negotiate their professional identity in the context of an educational reform which requires them to move more away from an educational institution and into working life. In view of this, the study reported here aims to understand how vocational teachers negotiate their professional identity in the context of a major externally imposed curriculum reform, one which sets teachers the challenge of increasingly crossing the boundaries between educational institution and working life, since the students are required to do more their studies through workplace learning. Our investigation of teachers' professional identity negotiations thus focuses on the following research questions:

How do vocational teachers perceive and describe their orientations towards a major curriculum reform in its initial stage?

How are vocational teachers' orientations towards the reform related to their individual backgrounds and social affordances?

## **Methods**

### *Data collection*

The study reported here focused on teachers in one vocational institution. The data were collected by means of interviews with sixteen Finnish vocational teachers (ten males and six females) aged from 31 to 57 years at the time of the interview. Their years of teaching experience ranged from 4 to 30 years. The participants taught in various study programmes, covering various fields of initial VET.

In Finland, vocational institutions offer three years of initial vocational education in different fields. All vocational qualifications include at least 20 credits (out of 120 credits) for students' workplace learning. As a consequence of the reform – as implemented by the institution used in this study – the vocational qualifications included 40–60 credits of students' workplace learning in the study programmes of the teachers interviewed. The data collection took place in the spring of 2006, when the curriculum reform was first introduced. The revised qualifications were due to be implemented during the following autumn semester, alongside the existing qualifications. The participants in the study were selected on a voluntary basis out of those teachers who were pioneers in implementing the new curriculum. Information concerning the teachers' participation in the interviews was delivered through a planning manager, who had the role of informing teachers about the reform. All the teachers were interviewed individually within their own vocational institution, and they were able to participate in the interviews during school hours. The rector of the institution had agreed to conduct the interviews within the school. The interviews lasted from roughly 75 minutes to 125 minutes per person.

At the time of the interviews in the spring of the 2006, teachers had been informed about the reform and they had commenced tasks related to its implementation, e.g. informing workplace personnel about the goals of the reform and finding workplaces for students' workplace learning periods. Furthermore, starting from the autumn semester, teachers would be expected to work more outside school, and to co-operate with workplaces. This would involve an increasing amount of work related to organising, guiding and evaluating students' workplace learning, and to guiding and training of the workplace trainers (i.e. workers who guide students within the workplace during their workplace learning periods).

The study focused on the teachers' subjective descriptions and accounts, utilising a narrative approach. In such an approach, the interviewees always take on particular functions in the telling of their stories. They create narratives which enable them to understand who they are, why they act in a particular way, and where they are headed. Identities emerge through such a telling process. Generally speaking, narratives can be used to describe and interpret participants' past experiences, events of various kinds, and the behaviour of other people (Bruner 1990; Hänninen 2004; Polkinghorne 1995; Watson 2006). Telling is thus a form of reflexive identity work (Taylor and Littleton 2006). A narrative is also a meaning structure, one that recognises the significance of prior experiences and events, constructs them into a plot and organises them as a whole (Bruner 1990; Polkinghorne 1995). However, narratives also provide orientations for the future. The construction of narratives is particularly important for individuals within situations of change: it helps the narrator to gain a sense of coherence, continuity and stability of the self (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Hänninen 2004). Narrating makes us able to cope with new situations in terms of our past experiences, and it gives us tools to plan for the future (Sfard and Prusak 2005).

In this study, the interviews focused on broad issues covering (i) the vocational teachers' professional development and career, (ii) the sense of their professional identity and the nature of their work, (iii) the continuous educational reforms and the current curriculum reform, (iv) the work community and organisation, and (v) the teachers' hopes and expectations for the future. Within the interviews, teachers hence had the opportunity to construct narratives of themselves as teachers, to describe and to interpret the current reform, and to put forward their own perspectives and orientations concerning the reform. Even though the same issues were brought up in all the interviews, the interviews did not all proceed in the same manner. The teachers were encouraged to talk freely about their own experiences and views. There were also other kinds of talk than just the relating of narratives

– including descriptions, evaluations, arguments, and opinions. The interviews were interactional situations in which both interviewer and interviewee were active and able to swap thoughts; they were not situations in which the interviewer was merely the questioner and listener, and the interviewee merely the teller or passive vessel providing answers. This explains why our interviews can be called open-ended narrative interviews (Fontana and Frey 2000) or active interviews (Holstein and Gubrium 2003) rather than semi-structured interviews. Thus, the interview material should be understood as produced through a social interaction between the researcher and the participant, situated within a specific context (Holstein and Gubrium 2003; Rapley 2007).

### *Data analysis*

All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim as a written protocol for analysis. The length of the transcript protocols varied from 20 to 32 pages (Times new roman 12, single-spaced) per interview. The data consisted of teachers' accounts, given in the course of interviews as separate but interrelated units; this means that an interview was not configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot (Polkinghorne 1995). The interview data were analysed in accordance with data-driven qualitative content analysis (Patton 2002) and narrative analysis approaches (Polkinghorne 1995; Riessman 2002). The data analysis included four phases.

In the first phase of the analysis, each written protocol was read by the researcher (i.e. the first named author) several times in order to discover the subject's characterisation of the reform. The aim was to identify the most meaningful contents of the data, such as would give a general description of the reform and the teacher's view of the reform. These teachers' descriptions were extracted from the primary interviews, then compressed into briefer descriptions for further analysis. After the reading and compression of the teachers' accounts, the second stage of the analysis started by mapping

systematically the teachers' own conceptions and perceptions of the reform, both *within* the same interviews and *across* the different interviews. During the analysis, it soon became clear that the teachers responded to and made sense of the reform in different ways. Thus, this second phase concentrated on the similarities and differences that could be identified within and between the individual accounts. Three different general orientations towards the reform were identified from this stage.

Thereafter, the third phase of the analysis involved an elaboration of teachers' individual backgrounds and of the social affordances that might be related to the teachers' different individual perceptions and orientations. Finally, we were able to arrive at six narratives that would comprehensively capture all the distinct ways in which teachers orientate themselves to the reform. In fact, every orientation involves *two* narratives, since within the similar orientation the teachers' reasons for their own perceptions showed a degree of variation. The narratives were constructed using parts of certain teachers' accounts that showed features in common. Mishler (1995) has called this method 'constructing the told from multiple tellings'. Note that although narratives are constructions, they include details taken from the actual data and from the teachers' accounts. However, to preserve anonymity, the narratives are not 'authentic' in the sense of being identifiable with any given teacher.

## **Findings**

This findings section is divided into two parts. In the first part, we report how vocational teachers perceived and described their orientations towards the curriculum reform in its initial stage. In the second part, we describe how these orientations were related to their individual backgrounds and social affordances.

### *Teachers' individual orientations towards the reform*

During the interviews, each vocational teacher described individually the current reform, made active sense of the reform's goals and effects, and indicated his/her concerns and hopes. The teachers interpreted the reforms from different perspectives, i.e. from the point of view of the self, other teachers, the students, working life, and the vocational study programme. From the teachers' accounts we were able to identify three qualitatively different orientations towards the reform: (i) a *resistant orientation*, (ii) an *inconsistent orientation*, and (iii) an *approving orientation* (Table 1). These orientations illuminate the teachers' self-positioning towards the reform.

- Insert the Table 1 about here -

Before describing these orientations towards the reform, we shall present the teachers' *shared* views on the reform. All the teachers emphasised that the reform would open up opportunities for teachers' learning and professional development, and that it would increase co-operation between the school and workplaces – aspects seen as desirable objectives by definition. A negative aspect that was generally identified was the top-down planning and imposition of the reform; there had been no serious attempt to take into account the opinions of teachers or of representatives from working life. The teachers also emphasised that the timetable of the reform was too rapid, and that the information provided on the reform had been inadequate; they were somewhat uncertain about the backgrounds and goals of the reform. They also saw the reform as a means of cutting costs. Under the new curriculum the students would do more of their studying in the workplace than before. In view of this, the teachers thought that the reorganisation would reduce teachers' working hours within the school itself, but that



perhaps not all these working hours would be transferred from the school to the working-life context. In this way it would be possible to save on teachers' labour costs. In the following sections we shall describe teachers' three main orientations towards the reform. Each orientation is illustrated in detail, using two different narratives.

#### *A resistant orientation*

Teachers with a resistant orientation were not satisfied with the current reform. They felt their existing role as a teacher to be meaningful. The reform was seen as establishing new expectations, with duties that would include e.g. more tasks related to students' workplace learning, co-operation with workplaces, and the guidance of workplace trainers. The reform was seen as a threat to the teachers' professional identity and role, given that the teachers wanted to educate the students and/or promote students' professional competencies within the school. These interviewees put forward different experience-based reasons for their unwillingness to approve the reform. They believed that the increase in students' workplace learning represented a movement in the wrong direction, and that the reform would not bring benefits for students' learning and personal development. The resistant teachers wondered 'why a good system should be changed', since they saw a real value in the existing curriculum. They wanted to protect the current VET system and the teacher's current role.

*A resistant orientation – The case of worried Ethan.* Ethan had been in teaching for a good many years. He liked his work and was strongly committed to his students, to supporting their personal development, and to helping students with personal problems, such as problems at home. He had a caring attitude towards his students, and he wanted to focus on encouraging the students, so that they would find their own place in working life and society:

*'I<sup>1</sup> see the ideal of an teacher, of course, as being that he or she is an educator... and if there are unsuccessful students who are falling through the safety net and who need more encouragement and have to be spurred on, then the teacher will react and try to give support – so it is great to see the students getting straightened out, being able to “blossom”, getting their act together...'*

The students' interests were always the starting point of Ethan's work. From this point of view, he was opposed to the reform. He had many concerns related to students and their well-being. Ethan was afraid that the students would be left quite alone without support in the workplaces, where they will spend more time under the new curriculum. He thought that workplace trainers did not have good competencies in supporting the construction of a student's personal identity. He was worried about the decreasing time that would be available to spend with the students at the school; he would no longer have the chance to function as a 'stable and safe adult' for the students. In addition, he took the view that the new curriculum would not promote students' professional development: certain subjects and theoretical issues would have to be taught within the school.

Ethan was not interested in planning and organising students' workplace learning, when his own professional orientation as an educator at the school was threatened by the reform. He mainly experienced his own boundary crossing between school and working life as pleasant. However, he had had some negative experiences of co-operation with working life, since the workers did not always have respect for teachers. He also thought that it would be more difficult find good workplaces for students in the future, having already had some problems in this regard.

*A resistant orientation – The case of comprehensively critical Laura.* Laura was of the opinion that the teacher's most important tasks are to teach theoretical issues and basic vocational skills, and to focus on promoting the construction of a students' professional identity within the school. The students'

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<sup>1</sup> The quotations which follow (italicised) are based on the verbatim comments of the vocational teachers.

learning outcomes had been excellent under the current system, and the practices of the vocational study programme were workable. Thus, Laura thought that school-based learning environments were workable. Overall, she saw the reform as a threat, and as having a negative effect on students' learning. She thought that the increase in students' workplace learning could have a negative affect on their outcomes, since theoretical issues and basic vocational skills might not be properly learned in the workplaces. Laura saw the reform as a particular threat to the professional development of weaker students. She believed that they would only be allowed to do less skilled jobs, due to the narrowing of their vocational skills. Furthermore, she did not want to transfer her duties to workplace trainers, because she thought that they were not motivated to teach vocational skills to the students, and did not have the pedagogical skills to provide such teaching.

Laura saw the reform as going against her views on the goals of vocational education. She ironically questioned the idea of the VET system: after all, why do we need vocational schools at all, if we can assume that vocational skills will be learned in the workplace? Nevertheless, Laura admitted that behind her criticism was her passion to protect the status of the teacher's profession: *'...Yeah, it can be also described as jealousy, maybe the idea that no one can carry out this teaching as well as the school can'*. Laura also said that as a consequence of the reform the teachers were being put in a situation of pressure and anxiety; the teacher's role was becoming more exhausting. It would add many new responsibilities, and in her words *'at the implementation stage all the problems will be piled onto the teacher's shoulders'*. The teachers would be required, for example, to motivate the representatives of working life so that they would carry out tasks, and to give guidance to workplace trainers. Laura believed that this would not be easy: companies would have no wish to have students working for free, since they would not receive any financial benefit or compensation for taking on the students. She also thought that workplaces would not be able to take on students for a longer period: companies lacked

the time and resources to give guidance to such students. However, for the working-life institutes, the reform could provide an opportunity to recruit new employees.

*An inconsistent orientation*

At the initial stage of the reform, some teachers' perceptions of the reform were strongly conflicting, and the orientation towards the reform was 'inconsistent'. Within the same interview, concerns and negative comments about the reform could be put forward, even when some advantages and opportunities were also highlighted. In this sense one can say that these teachers both agreed and disagreed with the reform. They interpreted the reform from different perspectives, but could not or did not wish to define their conceptions precisely, or to take a strong position for or against the reform. Overall, their position regarding the reform was ambiguous.

*An inconsistent orientation – The case of wait-and-see Alex.* Alex interpreted the reform mainly from the perspective of working life. Alex was critical, seeing the reform as problematic and as a burden on working life. The reform would increase the workload and responsibilities of workers in working-life institutions, and it would decrease their productivity. Alex believed that the partners from industry and working life did not support the reform. The reform might also cause motivational problems for students, who would have to do more unpaid work (students do not get salary during the workplace learning periods). Although Alex had many critical comments, he did not feel generally critical of the reform. He described the reform as neutral for himself personally – it would not greatly affect his work. He did not see the new and expanded tasks either as a threat or as an opportunity for himself. Alex also wanted to have more time before reaching a final conclusion: *'It's fifty-fifty, impossible to figure out what it will bring'*; *'Let's see, we'll get a better idea later'*. Furthermore, he wanted the effects of the

reform to be investigated thoroughly and systematically. In the end, Alex's position regarding the reform was sceptical, but broadly accepting.

*An inconsistent orientation – The case of confused Sarah.* Sarah has worked as a teacher for a long time. She emphasised that the current reform was good for her study programme, since the present programme had involved a degree of unnecessary overlapping – something that students had complained about. In addition, Sarah was willing to accept the reform on the grounds that the organisation's previous reforms had been excellent, and she wanted to focus on the overall benefits of the reform, and to avoid criticism. However, Sarah mentioned many disadvantages in relation to the reform. She had previously had some negative experiences of organising students' workplace learning. The reform increased her uncertainty and brought further fears as to how she would manage. She was worried about her own future, and confused about her coming role. She wondered '*what the role of the teacher will really be in working life, and what I'm going to do there, how I'll function there*'. She also thought that the implementation stage of the reform could be utterly exhausting and problematic for teachers. The reform presented new demands, which seemed to question her teachership and competencies:

*'At the moment teachership is in a way something I'm searching for... the discussion of the curriculum and of evidence-based evaluation has forced me to do this... that there's a small crisis, but this has made me think more about my own teaching... whether it is what it ought to be or at least as good as it could be.'*

In addition, Sarah thought that young students were often in need of a supportive adult, and that there was a risk of students being abandoned in the workplaces. All in all, Sarah was confused: she wanted to support the reform, but she had many fears for the future.

*An approving orientation*

Teachers with an approving orientation towards the reform were generally positively disposed towards the reform. The current contents of their work had not completely corresponded to what they would have wanted. They wanted to develop education, to work with the representatives of working life, and to organise and guide the students' workplace learning periods. For this reason, the reform was seen as something inspirational, something that would offer the opportunity to adopt the role they desired as a teacher, and to permit the exercising of a real sense of professional self. They had also had several positive experiences of co-operation with working life. The teachers with the approving orientation were able to see a balanced relationship between their actual sense of their professional selves, their prior experiences and the strategic directions of the reform. Some teachers also said that the reform could bring real benefits for the study programme, and for their students most of all.

*An approving orientation – The case of optimistic Amy.* Amy has been a teacher for many years. During her first years as a teacher, she had been satisfied with her work, because she was able to experiment freely with new teaching methods and to concentrate on teaching students basic vocational skills. In recent years, however, Amy had been obliged to focus more on non-vocational aspects of education, which had been in conflict with her professional orientation. Amy also mentioned some fairly negative experiences of working in the school context, where she had found the atmosphere to be hectic and poor: colleagues had given rather negative feedback, and the administrators had not supported her. Consequently, she had motivational problems and had even considered changing her profession. But even if her work had not inspired her all that much, Amy emphasised that in the context of students' workplace learning, co-operation with working life was something that was truly rewarding and pleasant.

Amy was really looking forward to the current reform. She believed that the roles offered by the reform would suit her extremely well. Amy no longer wished to concentrate only on teaching inside the vocational institution; she wanted to participate more in developing her duties and her co-operation with the representatives of working life. She thought that the reform could give a real boost to the notion of working as teacher:

*'I'm interested in developmental and administrative duties. In fact, I'm moving away from this basic teaching work...It doesn't provide me with any challenges... Somehow I feel that teaching is becoming a burden to me... In that sense, all these developmental projects have been really interesting.'*

Amy thought also that the reform would offer her better opportunities to plan and control her own work; she could be the boss in her own work without being confined to particular timetables within the school. Amy did not give deep consideration to the reform from other perspectives than her own. Her only worry was whether there would be enough financial resources for the students' workplace learning.

*An approving orientation – The case of enthusiastic Daniel.* Daniel had been a teacher for some years. He had a depth of commitment to developing, and he saw himself 'as a developer of a vocational study programme within working life'. He also wanted to focus more on working outside the school, emphasising that the role of teacher is to create learning opportunities for students and to organise their workplace learning. Daniel had found workplace learning to be more effective for students than learning within the school. He saw particular value in the feedback given to students by workplace trainers, since he had found that such feedback was more important for students' professional development than the feedback from teachers. In addition, he had good connections with different workplaces, as he had co-operated informally with the representatives of working life in these workplaces, and had worked in them himself. He saw the boundary-crossing between educational and

working-life institutions as meaningful and interesting. Daniel also hoped that the reform would decrease his working hours, for he was stressed due to his workload.

Daniel understood the current reform primary as an opportunity for developing his own vocational study programme in order to make it more working-life-related – hence it was an opportunity for the students and their learning. He believed that the increase in students’ workplace learning was the proper direction for the future, and that it fitted perfectly with his study programme. Daniel also felt comfortable with his coming role as a teacher. In his view, the reform would support his professional orientation. Daniel was aware of the fact that for young teacher, it could be easier to accept new demands:

*‘... if it’s suggested to the old teachers like, OK now let’s add on an extra forty credits just like that, then immediately it’s, for God’s sake, so much sighing – at least I feel there’s all this sighing about it. But then I start to think right away what it could actually mean, I’ve got this, maybe, too positive way of thinking sometimes, it’s probably that I’m not stuck in any formula yet, I’ve got no old models... at least it’s easy to move in a new direction when you don’t know what it was like before.’*

Overall he emphasised that the ideas behind the reform were excellent, though he was worried about whether the teachers would have enough resources and time to support the students in their workplaces, and also whether the young students would be ready to do more work in challenging workplaces.

### ***Teachers’ individual backgrounds and social affordances in relation to their orientations towards the reform***

The narratives of the teachers covered a wide range of topics related to the past, present and future. For example, teachers narrated prior experiences about organising students’ workplace learning, and gave their actual views about the goals of education. They also tried to look into the future, evaluating the



reform from the point of view of questions such as: What kinds of problems will emerge in the future? Is the coming role for the teacher a suitable one? Through the individual processes of remembering their past experiences, identifying their actual teaching orientation and visualising future situations, the teachers indicated their overall orientations towards the reform.

Teachers had different orientations precisely because they were utilising individually different resources in the process of understanding and interpreting the reform. Overall, one could say that the orientations were shaped by the following aspects: (i) the teachers' *actual sense of their professional selves*, involving especially their conceptions of their role, their beliefs about the students' learning, and their views of the goals of education, (ii) their *prior working experience*: this included working in vocational institutions and working-life institutions and moving between the two; it also included experiences of organising students' workplace learning, (iii) their *expectations concerning their professional future*: this included their ideas of their own future role as teachers, and their orientations to the future, and (iv) their *social affordances*: this included the practices and traditions of the vocational study programmes, and also the social suggestions provided by organisational factors in the schooling and working-life contexts. We also analysed how the teachers' age, teaching experience and gender were related to their orientations. Table 2 demonstrates that in fact these were not directly related the teachers' orientations.

- Insert the Table 2 about here -

## **Conclusion and discussion**

Although our findings emerge from a relatively small interview data set and from teachers' subjective accounts, we would suggest that they highlight important issues. Our analysis of the interview data,

taken from sixteen vocational teachers, showed that the orientations towards the major educational reform were individually varied. We identified three main orientations: (i) a resistant orientation, (ii) an inconsistent orientation and (iii) an approving orientation. Within each main orientation we could describe two different narratives illustrating teachers' varied positions in relation to the reform. Furthermore, our findings showed that in the negotiations of their professional identity in terms of orientations, teachers utilised individually different kinds of resources, namely their actual sense of their professional selves, their prior working experiences, and their expectations of their professional future. Additionally, they utilised different social affordances.

The findings showed that from the perspective of their sense of a professional self, some teachers felt that the reform could support their actual professional identity. Some teachers felt the requirements for change to be a threat to their actual professional identity, with the reform being likely to prevent them from exercising their professional selves. The reform was also seen as neutral by some teachers; these were persons who believed that the reform would not greatly affect their work. In making sense of the reform, teachers also drew on prior working experiences, such as their experiences of boundary-crossing between the school and the workplace. The teachers also described, for example, how the reform could affect their own role as teachers, and the students' learning in the future. In their accounts, teachers were thus building bridges between the past, the present and the future. Moreover, the reform could be described both as unsatisfactory and as appropriate, depending on the practices and traditions of different vocational study programmes. These findings are consistent with the findings of other studies addressing teachers' responses to reforms and the factors related to these responses (e.g. Spillane et al. 2002; van Veen and Slegers 2006). However, we suggest that in terms of orientations, vocational teachers' professional identity negotiations can be understood differently from those of teachers in comprehensive schools, since vocational teachers need to find a balance between schooling

and working-life institutions. As consequence of this, vocational teachers utilise perceptions and experiences related to the two contexts in question.

In terms of identity negotiations, the teachers seemed to negotiate a position on the reform by means of active identity work. The teachers perceived the reform as being imposed from the top; they felt that they were being expected to approve and commit themselves to its implementation. However, the teachers did not simply accept the reform passively: they exercised individual agency in the way they positioned themselves to the reform. In accordance with the views of Gleeson and Shain (1999), our findings thus imply that teachers cannot be regarded as merely subjugated to structural suggestions or determined by organisational managerialism. Rather, we could conclude that the relationships between social affordances and individual agency are constructed through individuals' active negotiations (Billett and Somerville 2004). In negotiating their orientation, the teachers had to achieve a reconciliation between their own actual sense of their professional selves, their working experiences, their expectations regarding their professional future, and different social affordances on the one hand, and possibilities and restrictions brought about by the reform on the other hand. That is, in this process, subjects have to try to understand the social requirements in question, and to recreate the relationship between the social and the personal by means of active identity work.

We can assume that the relationships between the individual and the social sphere are complex and dynamic. Our findings indicated that the reform can transform the relationships between the individual and the social sphere. On the one hand, some teachers had been satisfied with their work and job description before the reform; their actual professional self had been in balance with the social suggestion. These teachers felt that the reform would transform this situation; hence they criticised the reform. On the other hand, some teachers felt that before the reform their professional identity had been in conflict with the social expectations of the schooling context. These teachers thought that the reform

would create better opportunities for exercising their sense of professional self. The teachers who had the most positive orientations to the reform were, not surprisingly, those teachers who were not satisfied with their existing position in the schooling context. For these teachers the reform offered the promise of a better future.

In the interviews, vocational teachers discussed the meanings of the reform for themselves and in relation to other teachers, and they explained why teachers might react in different ways. This demonstrates how the teachers positioned themselves towards the reform through sameness and difference between their own self and that of others – illustrating in turn the relational nature of identity negotiations (e.g. Harré 1983). The youngest teachers in this study, particularly those with an approving orientation, reported that it was easier for them to be enthusiastic about the reform than for their older colleagues, since they had no established models for being a teacher. However, the findings did *not* demonstrate that older teachers were less enthusiastic about the reform than their younger colleagues – a finding conflicting with the results of Hargreaves (2005). Nevertheless, our findings do indicate that teachers could have different reasons for their approving orientation: the older teachers saw the reform as positive for themselves, whereas the younger teachers saw the reform primarily as an opportunity to develop the vocational study programme.

In recent discussion of educational reforms, teachers with a resistant orientation have often been understood as obstacles to the development of schooling. However, our findings showed that individual teachers might have several very good reasons for their resistance. From the individual perspective, the resistance can be understood as a process of protecting those missions and memories that involve a positive sense of what teachers are fighting for, rather than merely what they are opposed to (Goodson et al. 2006). The teachers' critical arguments should in any case be recognised, in order for the process

of change to be successful, and in order for all the teachers to be able to commit themselves to the change.

All in all, the teachers interviewed thought that the reform would offer them an opportunity for teachers' professional development and learning. Among the teachers there was also universal agreement that the way in which the reform had been planned – without asking opinions from teachers or working-life representatives – was a negative aspect of the reform. This implies that in the reform context the focus should be on empowering the individuals involved in the process, giving them the opportunity to exercise ownership and agency. In such a case, the professional competency of experienced teachers could also be utilised. Brain et al. (2006) argue that successful implementation depends precisely on finding an appropriate strategy that can utilise teachers' professional knowledge and skills. Instead of top-down management strategies, individuals should be invited to participate actively in the planning process and to contribute to the transformation of existing practices. One of the key elements for positive influences is that individuals can play an active role in the change process (Billett and Pavlova 2005; Billett and Somerville 2004; Buck 2005). In addition, all the teachers of this study criticised the reform on the grounds that they saw it as pure cost-cutting. They thought that the purpose of the reform was not merely to transfer all the teachers' working hours from the school to the working-life context, but perhaps also to reduce their working hours overall, so that salary costs could be decreased. This demonstrates how external factors such as the number of working hours and salary are important factors for ontological security in teachers' work. Buck (2005) has argued that teachers' salaries and working conditions must be sufficiently competitive in order to motivate them to carry through the reform process.

The teachers found that in the interviews they had an opportunity to make sense and understand the reform, to talk about their concerns and to elaborate the influences of the reform for the future

(Hänninen 2004; Sfard and Prusak 2005; Taylor and Littleton 2006). For many teachers, the interview was in fact their first opportunity to discuss the reform, since the lack of time had restricted opportunities for making sense of the reform, either individually or collectively. We would argue that more opportunities, more space and more time should be offered to teachers to reflect on and discuss matters arising in the reform context.

During the interviews, it became clear that teachers had their own interests and intentions in setting out their experiences and views. For example, one teacher described the reform in fairly negative terms, wishing to highlight the disadvantages, with a view to improvements being made. It should thus be noted that interviewees can intentionally select what is included in their accounts and what is omitted, and furthermore that points can simply be forgotten (Holstein and Gubrium 2003; Taylor and Littleton 2006; Watson 2006). Each account should always be seen as situated and incomplete. This paper has addressed how vocational teachers negotiated their professional identity and orientations towards the reform in its initial stage. However, without a further follow-up study we cannot assume that the orientations will remain stable in the future. Such a study might also illustrate how teachers engage in the implementation of the reform, and how the reform affects their work as teachers in the long term. By interviewing also the students and the representatives of working life, it would be possible to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of the reform.

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Table 1: Teachers' orientations towards the reform

	Resistant orientation (n=6)	Inconsistent orientation (n=5)	Approving orientation (n=5)
Definition	The teacher was against the reform: it was seen as thrusting an unwanted and difficult role on the teacher, and as a threat to students' personal and/or professional development.	The teacher had an ambiguous position towards the reform. The teacher could not or did not want to take a 'strong' position for or against the reform.	The teacher supported the reform: it was seen as offering desired tasks to the teacher, and/or as a great opportunity for students' learning and for the development of study programmes.
Narratives	Worried Ethan Comprehensively critical Laura	Wait-and-see Alex Confused Sarah	Optimistic Amy Enthusiastic Daniel

Table 2: Teachers' backgrounds related to their orientations towards the reform

Teachers' backgrounds	Resistant orientation (n=6)	Inconsistent orientation (n=5)	Approving orientation (n=5)
<b>Age</b>			
Range	40–52 years	40–57 years	31–55 years
Average	46 years	50 years	46 years
<b>Teaching experience</b>			
Range	5–16 years	11–25 years	4–30 years
Average	10 years	16 years	14 years
Gender	Male and female teachers	Male and female teachers	Male and female teachers