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Professional agency in the stream of change: understanding educational change and teachers' professional identities

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Abstract. The qualitative meta-study reported here investigated Finnish vocational teachers' professional agency amid an educational reform. Differences were found in teachers' agency regarding their work, their involvement with the reform, and their professional identity. The manifestations of agency could remain stable or could change over time, and agency drew on various resources (e.g. teacher identity and the organizational management culture). The theoretical conclusions encompass professional agency as multidimensional, largely individually varied, temporally imbued, and both socially and individually resourced. Based on the findings, an agency-centered approach is proposed as a means of understanding and supporting educational change and teacher identity negotiation.

1. Introduction

Educational change is a fact of teachers' professional lives. All educational organizations need to innovate and to develop their practices to keep pace with social and technological change, and to respond to economic pressures. In this situation, teachers need to adopt new professional roles, cultivate their professional identities, and incorporate new insights into their professional practices (Day & Kington, 2008; Hoekstra et al., 2009). However, transformations in educational practices

(Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2014; Sugrue, 2008) and in teachers' identities (Korthagen, 2004; Lasky, 2005) do not occur easily: in fact, they are slow, and hard to achieve. To encompass the complexity of transformation processes a sophisticated longitudinal examination is needed (Sugrue, 2008). This paper examines teachers' professional agency in the course of a specific educational reform that changed vocational teachers' work to involve more professional tasks outside the school. In so doing it seeks to shed light on teachers' professional identity negotiations and educational change, and to contribute to recent discussion on developing educational programs (e.g. Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Peck et al., 2009).

Professional agency has recently become a focus of international research in the fields of teaching and teacher education (e.g. Billett, 2014; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Lasky, 2005; März & Kelchtermans, 2013; Priestley, Edwards & Priestley, 2012). Generally speaking, professional agency refers to the notion that professionals such as teachers have the power to act, to affect matters, to make decisions and choices, and take stances, for example, in relation to their work and professional identities (Eteläpelto et al., 2013; Ketelaar et al., 2012; Lasky, 2005; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Taking this theoretical conceptualization as a starting point, the present paper looks at teachers' professional agency in the stream of educational change within Finnish initial vocational education and training. More precisely, the influence of teachers, and their choices and actions, are examined in relation to three complementary components of agency, including (i) their own work, (ii) their involvement with an educational reform, and (iii) the negotiation of their professional identity.

In Finland, vocational education has traditionally been school-based, meaning that vocational competencies have been taught mainly to students within vocational institutions. Similarly in a number of other countries (e.g. France, Sweden, and the United States), vocational education and the world of work have been viewed as somewhat disconnected (Barabasch & Rauner, 2012; Fejes & Köpsén, 2014). However, in Finland as elsewhere, recent reforms have aimed to break down the separation between schools and workplaces, and to develop vocational studies at the upper

secondary level to include more learning outside the school. Thus, over a three-year period of study (120 credits), it is envisaged that the learning outside the school should be worth at least 20 credits (six months). The main responsibility for providing vocational studies lies with the vocational institutions. Compared to other countries there are differences. For example, for Swedish students, the minimum duration of the workplace practicum is 15 weeks during three years, whereas in German-speaking countries, vocational studies are mostly completed in the context of an apprenticeship. During the apprenticeship, students spend a significant amount of time within working life. This kind of program is based on the liaison of companies, who function as training providers and as responsible bodies, and education and training institutes. As the trend in many countries has been to reduce school-based teaching, teachers are required to cross boundaries between school and working life. This involves them in multiple tasks notably related to students' workplace learning. Given their interaction across organizational and professional boundaries, today's vocational teachers can be described as border-crossers (cf. Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Wenger, 1998).

The purpose of this study was to investigate professional agency in the context of change, incorporating various (not merely change-oriented) manifestations and resources related to agency. The present paper further considers the temporal nature of agency, and its importance for individual teachers and social transformation. To shed light on these issues, the qualitative meta-study presented in this paper utilized previous studies to which the various authors had contributed (Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009, 2011; Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, Eteläpelto, Rasku-Puttonen, & Littleton, 2008; Vähäsantanen, Saarinen & Eteläpelto, 2009). The meta-study synthesized the main findings of the primary studies in order to construct comprehensive knowledge on professional agency in the course of change. So far, empirical studies on teacher agency (including the studies underlying this meta-study and the studies presented in Section 2) have examined agency mostly from a single perspective (e.g. involvement with educational reform), and cross-sectionally, i.e. in a specific situation within the reform.

In this study, three components of professional agency were integrated, addressing professional agency also as a continuing phenomenon. The latter was possible due to the fact that the primary studies were conducted at the different stages of an educational reform. The reform was introduced in a single vocational institution, and it was designed by managers on a top-down basis. As a consequence of this local reform, the workplace learning load of students increased tremendously, from the national minimum to 40–60 credits, and teachers had to undertake more professional duties outside the school in close collaboration with workplaces. The primary studies were based on interviews with vocational teachers, and they applied different qualitative analytical methods, including narrative analysis, thematic analysis, and content analysis.

Altogether, the present paper seeks to provide an advanced conceptualization of professional agency, and to argue for an agency-centered approach (involving a combination of different components of professional agency, and applying a longitudinal perspective) as a means of understanding the complexity of educational change and the cultivation of teacher identity. Thus, in highlighting the manifestations of professional agency within a temporal continuum, the paper seeks to offer new perspectives to understand the success and failure of educational changes, and on identity transformation. The practical implications include some measures by which leaders and practitioners may promote educational change and support teachers amid the changes.

2. Professional agency amid change

To gain a comprehensive picture of professional agency, teachers' professional agency amid educational change is here considered from three perspectives. First of all, professional agency can be understood as the teacher's opportunities to influence his or her own work (Ketelaar et al., 2012; Priestley et al., 2012; Pyhältö, Pietarinen & Soini, 2012). This includes negotiating the contents and conditions of one's work (including reform practices), and making decisions on one's ways of working. In terms of influencing the contents, design, and organization of educational change, teachers may be active participants, treated as persons whose actions and opinions matter. However,

although the idea of teachers as developmental agents has long been central to educational thinking, a common theme nowadays is that in many countries (such as Australia and the Netherlands) reforms are designed and imposed on a top-down basis (see Billett, 2014; Luttenberg, van Veen & Imants, 2013a; Pyhältö et al, 2012). In the absence of opportunities for active participation and influence, the agency of teachers is reduced. One can ask what such "subordinated" agency might mean, for example, in terms of teachers' commitment to educational changes and to organizations. There is also a need to explore whether a top-down management style, which leaves little space for teachers' agency, may actually be effective in transforming the educational landscape – since there is some evidence that educational change can be difficult to accomplish when teachers have abundant agency (Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2014; Orton & Weick, 1990).

A second perspective on professional agency encompasses the choices and decisions made by a teacher concerning her/his involvement with an educational reform during its implementation. Implementing innovations is not a matter of straightforwardly executing policies; rather, it involves a process of sense-making through which teachers make meaning from their work environments, a process which in turn orients their decisions and actions (März & Kelchtermans, 2013). In the course of a reform, teachers' decisions and actions can be elaborated at least in two directions, i.e. in terms of (i) taking a position (i.e. a mental stance) towards the reform (Imants, Wubbels & Vermunt, 2013; Luttenberg, Imants & van Veen, 2013b), and (ii) engaging with the reform, referring to practical activities undertaken during the enacting of the reform (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008; März & Kelchtermans, 2013). Since teachers are often the people most directly involved in implementing educational reforms, if we are to understand the complexity and the success of changes we must examine how teachers become involved in these two aspects via conscious stances and deliberate activities. So far, a study of Pyhältö et al. (2012) has argued that teachers' agency can be manifested in proactive actions in line with the reform – but also in criticisms and resistance. This implies that agency may not always have purely positive connotations.

Thirdly, professional agency is connected to the nature of professional identity amid changes. Professional identity can be seen as a work history-based constellation of teachers' perceptions of themselves as a professional actors. A teacher's professional identity encompasses the individual's current professional interests, views on teaching and on the students' learning, and future prospects (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004; Lasky, 2005; Sutherland, Howard & Markauskaite, 2010; van Veen & Sleegers, 2009). The connection between professional identity, agency, and change emerges from the fact that educational change often requires the renegotiation of professional identity, in which process professional agency emerges as salient (Beijaard et al., 2004; Day et al., 2006; Kayi-Aydar, 2015). This implies that it will be necessary to investigate various forms of professional agency in seeking to understand how professional identities are negotiated.

All of the above suggests that it will be necessary to elaborate professional agency if one is to understand the processes through which change and continuity occur in educational settings and in professional identities. Although there have been an increasing number of empirical studies on teacher agency within a reform (reviewed in this section), they have addressed teacher agency mostly from a single perspective, relating to a particular period of the reform. Hence the present paper will look at professional agency in terms of components that may be prominent at different stages of the reform. These include (i) influence on one's own work, (ii) involvement with the reform, and (iii) the negotiation of professional identity.

3. Multidisciplinary theoretical notions on agency

There are different notions on how agency and structure are related to each other, and on which exerts more power over the other. Within the literature, in its extreme forms agency is seen as subjects' freedom to act in accordance with their individual desires, regardless of social context, or else as something that is reduced or eliminated when subjects' actions are subjugated by social structures (see Ahearn, 2001; Eteläpelto et al., 2013). At a time of school reform, these oppositions

can involve practitioners and researchers focusing on the importance of agency at the expense of structural aspects – or else, in the opposite case, structure may be seen as paramount, with no role left for actors in the transforming practices (März & Kelchtermans, 2013; Priestley et al., 2012). The starting point in the present investigation was an acknowledgement of the roles of both the agentic actor and of structures, with at the same time, a willingness to use theoretical notions emerging from the socio-cultural approach, the social sciences, and poststructural ideas (see below).

The socio-cultural approach conceptualizes teacher agency as relationally embedded across social circumstances, tools, and people (e.g. Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). This means that what individuals believe, and how they think and act, is always shaped by historical and socio-cultural practices (see also Wertsch, Tulviste & Hagstrom, 1993). In the work of teachers, the relevant socio-cultural practices and suggestions include curriculum guidelines, cultural norms, and social directions and resources (Lasky, 2005). Although the socio-cultural approach has focused mostly on the social resources related to agency, recent subject-centered socio-cultural approaches suggest a need to integrate both the individual and the social contributions surrounding professional agency, if we are to understand the remaking of work practices and identities at work (Billett, 2011; Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

The temporal nature of agency has mostly been discussed within the social sciences. For Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency is a temporally embedded process of social engagement performed in the present, but informed by past influences and habits, and also oriented toward the future. In the context of educational change, Priestley et al. (2012) have further argued the need to take into account temporal dimensions in teacher agency. Furthermore, the notions of Archer (2003) encompass variations in agency between subjects, and between different stages of their life course. Archer further suggests that it is useful to recognize structure and agency as analytically separable but interdependent, since the analytical distinction makes it possible to analyze separately individual and social resources for agency.

Agency has also been a topic in poststructuralist approaches to education. In these it is emphasized that agency cannot be isolated from the dynamics of power. The role of power and culture comes to the fore when one creates discourses and practices with specific subject positions; the subject's agency is then seen to lie in her/his ways of participating (involving e.g. resistance and adaptation) in these educational discourses and practices (St. Pierre, 2000; Zembylas, 2003). Overall, although the specific individual resources related to agency (apart from for gender) have not been fully defined, post-structural readings nicely emphasize the role of power – power which can be understood as existing in the organizational management culture – and they further point to the situational nature of agency.

4. Aim, and questions addressed

This paper seeks to illuminate Finnish vocational teachers' professional agency in the course of change. Recognizing the various important features of agency outlined above, it addresses the following questions:

1. How is the professional agency of teachers manifested?
2. What kinds of individual and social resources are intertwined with teachers' professional agency?
3. What kinds of temporal elements are related to teachers' professional agency?
4. What is the importance of professional agency for individual teachers and for the transformation of social practices?

For the purposes of this paper, the questions are addressed in relation to three complementary components of professional agency outlined.

5. Methods

5.1. Data and participants

The meta-study presented here reanalyzed data from five empirical studies which utilized the same empirical evidence (Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009, 2011;

Vähäsantanen et al., 2008; Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). The research questions of the meta-analysis were informed by the existing literature. They were seen as linking together all the five primary studies so as to gain an elaborated picture of professional agency in the course of change. The questions in the primary studies addressed the individual components of professional agency (e.g. involvement with an educational reform). Therefore, individual analyses provided a variety of perspectives on teachers' professional agency. However, conducted as separate studies, they did not provide a comprehensive description of the phenomena under investigation, i.e. a description that would bring together different manifestations and resources of agency, its temporal nature, and its salience at the individual and social level. The purpose of the present study was thus to create a new synthesis: it sought to present a comprehensive picture of professional agency, arrived at via a meta-analysis of the main findings of the primary studies.

The empirical data used in the primary studies were collected at different stages of an educational reform in a vocational institution. The managers of the institution designed the reform. The main aim of this local reform was to increase students' workplace learning outside the school. Within the reform under investigation, ten qualifications (e.g. qualifications in Vehicle Technology and in Restaurant Services) were revised. Overall, there are 53 different qualifications (each qualification involves at least one study program) within Finnish initial vocational education and training. The reform was mandatory for the teachers. As the consequence of the reform, teachers had a greatly increased workload related to organizing, guiding, and evaluating students' workplace learning. In addition, the teachers' tasks included guiding and liaising with workers who would themselves take on a training function – guiding students within the workplaces during their workplace learning periods.

The data consisted of interviews with vocational teachers. In 2006, sixteen teachers were interviewed, and fourteen of these teachers were re-interviewed in 2007. The teachers (ten men, six women) had an age range of 31–57 years, with teaching experience of 4 to 30 years. The participants were selected on a voluntary basis out of those teachers who were at the forefront of the

implementation of the reform. Each teacher had a professional background in a particular vocational field and taught for a specific vocational qualification.

It should be noted that in order to become legally qualified as teachers in Finnish upper secondary vocational education, persons who teach vocational subjects (such as the teachers in this study) are required to have a higher education degree (or a lower degree where no such level exists) in the field in which they teach, and a minimum of three years of work experience in the field in question. This means that each teacher is a specialist in one specific field. The teachers must also complete pedagogical studies (60 credits), which are provided by both traditional universities and universities of applied sciences. These studies (1-3 years) include particularly basic studies in educational sciences, vocational pedagogy studies, and teaching practice. Due to these requirements for vocational teachers, Finnish vocational teachers are well qualified.

In the first stage of the data collection, interviews were used to capture data on (i) the teachers' professional development and career, (ii) their sense of professional identity and the nature of their work, (iii) the continuous educational reforms and the current curriculum reform, (iv) their work community and organization, and (v) their hopes and expectations for the future. Professional agency was embedded in all these topics. The interviews varied in length from 75 minutes to 125 minutes. The follow-up interviews varied from 35 minutes to 80 minutes. These interviews addressed topics similar to the first interviews (such as teachers' professional identity, the organization, and future prospects); however, they focused particularly on what had happened to the teachers' work since the previous interviews. They also covered the interviewees' current perceptions of the reform and its consequences. All the interviews were of the narrative type (Riessman, 2008), i.e. they were unstructured, in so far as there were no prepared questions, even if the themes presented guided the interview. During the interviews, the interviewees were encouraged to talk openly about themselves, their work, and their work organization.

5.2. Data analysis

A qualitative meta-analysis was applied in order to undertake a rigorous secondary analysis of the primary empirical findings (Schreiber, Crooks & Stern, 1997; Timulak, 2009). The primary studies had used the same empirical data, but had utilized a variety of qualitative analytical approaches, including narrative analysis (e.g. Riessman, 2008), thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and content analysis (Patton, 2002). The author of this paper was a first author in all of the primary studies. The studies were co-authored by various researchers from three countries, but only one of them acted as a co-author in more than one primary study. One could say that the different combinations of authors made it possible to see the data from various perspectives. However, one important limitation of the meta-analysis was the lack of more studies from independent researchers using different samples. A further limitation was that the interviewees were selected on a voluntary basis, which might diminish the representativeness of the sample.

The analysis of the meta-study was an empirical and theory-driven exercise, but it was also interpretive in nature, since during the analysis new categorizations and conceptualizations of the original findings were arrived at (Schreiber et al., 1997; Timulak, 2009). Within the meta-analysis, the essential elements of the previous studies (informed by the theoretically-grounded questions) were extracted, coded and listed, and the main findings were compared and categorized. From this analysis, a new set of findings was abstracted. More precisely, the meta-analysis involved the following phases, which were conducted in relation to each research question. At the first stage, the material was read carefully in order to identify and code the main findings and key concepts. The intention of this process was to label findings in such a way as to assist later synthesis and conceptualization. After identifying the key elements of the previous studies, they were listed, compared and categorized. Similar elements were placed within the same broad categorization, and categories were abstracted. For example, in the case of the second research question, the first step was to identify the resources of professional agency in terms of influence on one's work, involvement with an educational reform, and the negotiation of professional identity. All the

resources relative to these three components of agency were listed and categorized in accordance with their nature. At this stage, for example, the professional relationships with workplace personnel were located within the category of social resources, and professional competencies were placed within the category of individual resources for agency. Here one should note that the focus in the primary studies had been on the resources which the interviewees had indicated as bearing a relationship with their professional agency.

The categorization was done in order to create a new and condensed picture on professional agency, showing differences in its manifestations, its resources, its temporal nature, and its impact. This process involved forming syntheses as a foundation for general claims. The categories were linked to the research questions, including, for example, categories of weak or strong agency relative to influence on one's work. They should be understood as general descriptions of phenomena, but as nevertheless including some nuanced elements. The findings were presented to the teachers interviewed, and to the co-authors of the primary studies.

The sections below summarize the main findings from the meta-analysis with empirical extracts in the order of the research questions. The first section (6.) covers how professional agency was manifested in terms of (i) influence on one's work, (ii) involvement with the educational reform, and (iii) the negotiation of professional identity. Related to these components, the second section (7.) illustrates various resources for professional agency. In a sense, these offer explanations for the various manifestations of agency presented in the first section, while the third section (8.) demonstrates the temporal nature of agency. The fourth section (9.) explores the importance of professional agency for teachers and for the transformation of social practices.

6. The manifestations of professional agency

6.1. Influence on one's work: weak – strong agency

The meta-analysis showed a variety of manifestations of professional agency in terms of influencing the teacher's work. To begin with, the analysis revealed that the vocational teachers'

work was determined by social guidelines and by administrative regulations, and that the teachers experienced a lack of direct influence on the contents and conditions of their work at the community and organizational levels (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011; Vähäsantanen et al., 2008). Many of the important decisions concerning education, resources, the curriculum, and the contents of teachers' work were made by the administrative body of the organization with insufficient opportunities for teachers to exert influence. One teacher described this kind of weak agency at work, along with hopes for gaining more opportunities to exert influence:

Teachers ought to be able to participate more in the decision-making process concerning their own work... Let's say that there is a lot of bureaucracy coming from above and that this determines and defines an awful lot of issues. So I feel that the organization here is keeping me on a leash. And this doesn't suit me very well as a person. I would want to decide about my own things more than it is possible here.

All this is in line with recent discussion emphasizing that the work of teachers is increasingly controlled by external bodies (Lindblad & Goodson, 2011; Moos, 2009).

The teachers also experienced a lack of extensive influence on the contents and conditions of the current educational reform in its different stages (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009, 2011; Vähäsantanen et al., 2008). As one teacher put it:

Teachers were simply and brutally been told to adopt the current reform, which they must implement. No questions were asked, it was just an order coming from above... There were no opportunities to have an influence on anything.

Overall, they felt that the reform was planned and organized mainly by the administration; they could not participate in this work, and their opinions were not heard. The analysis thus supports the notions that in the context of transforming education, teachers often perceive themselves as passive objects whose actions are mainly regulated by external bodies, rather than as active subjects whose opinions and ideas do matter (Lasky, 2005; Pyhältö et al., 2012; van Veen & Sleegers, 2009). All

this can be conceptualized as illustrating vocational teachers' weak agency concerning their work at the community and organizational levels.

Despite this, at the individual level, the vocational teachers did appear to have a sense of strong agency related to their work. This was manifested in terms of having ample opportunities to make decisions about pedagogical issues. Indeed, the opportunities were so far-reaching that some teachers might wish for more support and for more precise guidelines:

> *It would be important to have somebody, even a leader, for sharing thoughts and checking pedagogical methods. Then I could have confirmation and approval or even some limits, at least something. Now when you are working alone without restrictions, you don't know if your teaching is OK.*

Furthermore, when the teachers guided the students' workplace learning outside the educational organization and worked with the representatives of working life in boundary-crossing settings, they were able to exert active and strong agency, in terms of making choices about their ways of working (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). Examined in more detail, the choices of the teachers were seen as leading to various forms of work behavior. Altogether, teachers in boundary-crossing settings were found to exhibit five different forms of agency, namely (i) *restricted agency*, (ii) *multifaceted balancing agency*, (iii) *situationally diverse agency,* (iv) *relationally emergent agency,* and (v) *extensive agency*. In the case of restricted agency, teachers were humble and uncritical, showing no willingness to advise the employees on ways of working, or to intervene in the practices taught to students by employees, even if the practices were unsuitable. Conversely, teachers with extensive agency were active and critical participants in their collaboration with employees and in guiding the students in the workplaces, initiating proposals to improve work practices in working life. The finding concerning teachers' agency at an individual level is in line with notions that the ways of working of teachers are not totally externally imposed (e.g. Ketelaar et al., 2012). The findings also drew a picture of the teachers' work as manifold in nature, since the possibilities for teachers to influence their work practices involved a very wide spectrum of activities and behavior.

Overall, it appeared that in terms of influencing their work, the teachers' professional agency was manifested to a lesser or greater degree, and that it varied from weak to strong. This implies that teachers can have limited agency in developing education and determining the contents of their work, but may simultaneously have strong agency concerning their ways of working on a practical level.

6.2. Involvement with the reform: reserved – progressive agency

Although the vocational teachers did not have extensive opportunities to influence the contents and directions of the reform, the meta-analysis showed that they did not merely drift passively in the stream of educational change (Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009, 2011). On the contrary, they actively evaluated change and decided how to involve themselves with the change – the kind of decision-making, according to Ballet & Kelchtermans (2008), that safeguards teachers' agency.

Even within a single, given reform, there was variation between vocational teachers in terms of taking positions towards the reform at its initial stage (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009). The positions *were resistant, inconsistent, and approving*. The teachers with a resistant position were against the reform, positioning themselves openly as opponents of the reform. The approving teachers were positively and enthusiastically inclined towards the reform, positioning themselves as wholesale supporters of the reform. Some teachers also had an ambiguous response to the reform. These teachers expressed both concerns and negative comments about the reform; they mentioned advantages and put forward positive opinions, but they could not or did not wish take a consistent position at that particular moment. As one teacher put it: *'It [my opinion on the reform] is fifty-fifty, impossible to figure out what it will bring'*. Thus, their position was inconsistent. These findings confirm previous notions that each teacher is likely to respond and position herself/himself individually towards a reform (Imants et al., 2013; van Veen & Sleegers, 2006). Moreover, it should

not be assumed that an individual teacher's reaction to reform will be one of total acceptance or total resistance (see also Luttenberg et al., 2013a).

It was further observed that there were both continuities and transformations in the teachers' positions towards the reform as it ran its course (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). For example, one teacher remained a critical performer over time, while another initially resistant teacher became an enthusiastic supporter of the reform. By contrast, yet another initially enthusiastic teacher lost motivation over time. Thus, the findings show how initially "reform-enthusiastic" teachers can be at risk of disillusionment (van Veen & Sleegers, 2009), while others can find positive pathways through a reform despite their initial resistant positions. These notions are not consistent with the study of Lee and Yin (2011), which showed only unsuccessful journeys through an educational reform, with teachers categorized as losing-heart accommodators, drifting followers, and cynical performers.

In discussing teacher agency, it is not only a question of how teachers position themselves in relation to reforms, but also how they act in engaging with reforms. Among the vocational teachers, there was tremendous variation in terms of engaging with the reform (Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008). Their engagement strategies varied from *active participation* to *passive accommodation*. Teachers of the "active participation" type energetically implemented the reform. They did not accept the approaches and role-related ways of working determined by the organization, seeking rather to refine them innovatively to make them more suitable in practice. By contrast, teachers who adopted the passive accommodation strategy merely adjusted and tolerated the social demands. Those teachers were ready to carry out their professional tasks, but since their main concern was their personal well-being, they decided merely to do their job without excessive investment. Additional three engagmnent strategies among the vocational teachers included *professional development*, a *balancing act*, and *withdrawal*. Teachers with the professional development strategy were motivated to carry out their new tasks, but they hoped professional training to improve their inadequate competencies and hence to fulfil the required duties. A balancing act involved active

engagement with the reform, but also phases of partial retreat from the work (e.g. via a sabbatical period) to avoid the exhaustion. The withdrawal strategy was manifested in suspicious engagement with the reform, with propable disengagement from the reform and from the organization. Along fairly similar lines, Luttenberg et al. (2013a) has identified four ways of making sense of matters and of acting in a reform context, including assimilation, accommodation, toleration, and distantiation. Other studies have shown that teachers' engagement can vary from adaptation to becoming a reform generator (Brain, Reid & Comerford Boyes, 2006; Day, Elliot & Kington, 2005).

Overall, in line with Priestley et al. (2012), the meta-analysis underlines the notion that there is some scope for teachers' agency in the reform context, involving various forms of decisions and actions. The positions towards and engagements with the reform differed considerably among vocational teachers, suggesting a variety of manifestations of agency. An important overall finding and categorization deriving from the meta-analysis would be that in terms of involvement with the reform, the teachers' professional agency was manifested through stances and activities that varied from *reserved* to *progressive*. Here, "reserved" means that resistant positions were expressed towards the reform, and that the teachers did not perform more than the minimum activities required of them. "Progressive" means that approving positions emerged, and that a proportion of the teachers engaged actively and innovatively with the reform.

6.3. Negotiation of professional identity: maintainable – transformative agency

In the investigation of professional identities, the vocational teachers were found to have differing perceptions of themselves as teachers (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009; Vähäsantanen et al., 2008). Some teachers wanted to focus on educating students or on teaching their subject within the educational organization; some teachers were oriented more towards collaboration (particularly with the representatives outside the school), while yet others wanted to do developmental tasks. In a reform context, professional identity negotiation can be observed as a process in which the teacher's existing professional identity confronts a designated identity, one that emerges from changing social

suggestions (e.g. social expectations, guidelines, and demands; see Billett, 2006) pertaining to the teacher's work tasks and educational practices (cf. Sfard & Prusak, 2005). In those cases where the vocational teachers had been wholeheartedly oriented to teaching the students within the school, the teachers found that their identities conflicted with the new social expectations deriving from changed educational practices (Vähäsantanen et al., 2008). At the same time, some teachers' identities were in balance with the social suggestions experienced, particularly if their own orientation was towards working outside the educational organization.

When the vocational teachers' existing professional identities were in close correspondence with the reformed social suggestions, they simply embraced the expected identity and exercised agency by maintaining their identities (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). In a situation where the teachers' existing professional identities and social demands were in conflict, identity negotiations become more challenging, and the teachers exercised professional agency in different ways. Some teachers were ready to transform their professional identities to correspond to the socially expected identity associated with the reform. Thus, simultaneously with changes in their work practices, changes occurred in their professional views and interests. However, other vocational teachers refused to bridge the gap between their existing identity and socially expected identity; in other words, they maintained their identities, but were ready to carry out the professional tasks laid down by the reform. Along similar lines, Korthagen (2004) has argued that teachers' identity is less open to revision than their actual behavior. Altogether, in line with some other authors (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Day et al., 2006), the study highlights the notion that the professional identity of teachers appears to be a phenomenon that can have some degree of stability – but which nevertheless has the potential for change over time.

An overall finding of the meta-analysis would be that in terms of negotiating professional identity, professional agency was manifested through activities ranging from maintainable to transformative. An educational change can challenge teachers to re-negotiate their identities, but it may also be insufficient to produce a process of identity reformation. This emphasizes the nature of

professional agency: a teacher's identity is always constructed in relation to social context, but social demands alone are not enough to change teachers' identities in the absence of their own active efforts and influence (Beijaard et al., 2004; Day et al., 2006; Lasky, 2005; Reeves, 2009).

7. Individual and social resources for professional agency

The meta-analysis revealed various individual and social resources for professional agency. As illustrated above, the vocational teachers were unable to exert strong agency concerning educational reform practices or the contents of their work. All the teachers shared this experience; there were no differences between the teachers in relation to, for example, the extent of their work experience (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009; Vähäsantanen et al., 2008). Thus, the meta-analysis suggests that it was the management culture of the vocational institutions, with its powerful suggestions concerning the contents of the work and the curriculum, which narrowed teachers' professional agency; the individual backgrounds of the teachers were of less importance in this respect.

When the vocational teachers made decisions on their work behavior in boundary-crossing situations, their professional agency was linked to how they saw their relationships with workplace personnel, and how they viewed themselves in relation to the professional tasks determined by the school (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). The exercise of agency was also intertwined with their professional interests, professional competencies, and previous work experiences. It is particularly clear that teachers' professional competencies within their vocational field were essential, both as resources and (in the case of lesser competencies) obstacles for the exercise of agency (cf. Isopahkala-Bouret, 2010). Vocational teachers need a variety of professional skills and knowledge, including the ability to speak the same language (in terms of vocational field-specific terminology) as the workers, in order to interact successfully with them and to transform workplace practices. In this respect, the exercise of agency actively requires various tools, including language (Lasky, 2005). To sum up, the importance of both individual and social resources for professional agency became abundantly clear in boundary-crossing settings. In order to make boundary-crossing optimal

for individuals and for the development of workplace practices, teachers need to utilize their

professional competencies and to create workable relationships with workplace staff.

The meta-analysis further showed that vocational teachers' involvement with the reform was

imbued by both individual and social resources (Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008; Vähäsantanen &

Eteläpelto, 2009, 2011). First of all, vocational teachers' positions towards the reform (at its initial

stage) were related to (i) the teachers' individual backgrounds (including current perceptions of

professional interests and role, beliefs about the students' learning, views on the goals of education,

prior work experiences, and expectations of their professional future) and (ii) various social

affordances, such as the practices and traditions of the vocational study programs (Vähäsantanen &

Eteläpelto, 2009). Notably professional identity – encompassing teachers' professional interests and

desires for the future – influenced the exercise of agency in terms of taking positions towards the

reform. This notion is supported by previous studies (e.g. Veen & Sleegers, 2006). However, the

teachers' age, teaching experience, and gender were *not* directly related to their reactions. This

notion diverges from previous findings (e.g. those of Hargreaves, 2005; Peachter, 2003). Although

there were various positions towards the reform, the vocational teachers also shared similar views

on the reform (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009; Vähäsantanen et al., 2008). The teachers all

strongly criticized the top-down style of the reform, noting that there had been no serious attempts

to take into account the opinions of teachers or to give them opportunities to influence the reform

practices.

With regard to the teachers' engagement with the reform at its initial stage, the most salient

aspects included concerns about their personal well-being, their professional identity, their work

performance, and the impacts of the reform on the students (Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008). The

findings here are in line with the observation that it is the overall relationship between teachers'

identity and reform practices (Day et al., 2005) that influences how teachers engage with reform

directions. However, what emerged more clearly here than in previous studies was the importance

of teachers' well-being for their full engagement. It was this that led some teachers to exercise their

professional agency via a strategy of passive accommodation, i.e. a strategy that could preserve their personal well-being. As one teacher described her situation in the reform context:

The new tasks [mandated by the reform] are wearing, although I also feel that they will give a new attraction towards the work. I'm living in a situation where I'm balancing out my work with my other life. I don't neglect my work, but I do it with minimum energy…. Actually I try to set a limit to putting in too many hours and too much effort into my work and to the issues that consume me. In this changing work situation, I try to do my work as well as I can, but I carry out my tasks so that I protect myself and my well-being.

With respect to teacher identity, Beijaard et al. (2004) have emphasized that its construction is a process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences derived from practices (see also Sutherland et al., 2010). The present study confirms and extends this notion. The continuities and transformations in vocational teachers' professional identities and positions towards the reform were grounded on their interpretations of their own experiences and emotions during the reform (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). These experiences and emotions were undoubtedly related to the students, to the teachers' work and the resources available for their work, and in particular, to the opportunities and constraints surrounding professional identity and/or the sense of agency (cf. Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008; Lasky, 2005). For example, the initially enthusiastic teacher changed her position to one of greater resistance because of the negative implications of the reform for her work, with its restrictions on her professional identity and agency. Despite this, her actual professional identity did not change, and she continued to maintain it. At the same time, the initially resistant teacher became an enthusiastic supporter of the reform; she transformed her identity due to her emotionally-imbued positive experiences related to her work, and to the students' learning.

In summary, a key finding emerging from the meta-analysis was that professional agency is bound up with both individual and social resources. Overall, the findings also support notions of the importance of emotions for teacher identity negotiation (Pillen, Beijaard & den Brok, 2013;

Zembylas, 2003) and involvement with the reform (Schmidt & Datnow, 2005; März & Kelchtermans, 2013).

8. The temporal nature of professional agency

The synthesis of the previous studies led to some notions concerning the temporal nature of professional agency among vocational teachers. First of all, agency was found to be intertwined with the past, the present, and the future. This became clear in so far as the teachers utilized resources from the past (work experiences), the present (e.g. professional interests), and the future (expectations for the future), for example, when they made choices concerning their positions towards the reform. In other words, teachers' professional agency was related to the dynamic interplay of different temporal dimensions (cf. Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Priestley et al., 2012).

The temporal nature of professional agency also became clear when a vocational teacher reported that he had learnt from his past experiences that it was pointless even to try to influence work and reform practices, since nothing would be gained by so doing (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). This shows that previous experiences can shape how a teacher acts in a reform situation. Furthermore, the teachers' experience of weak professional agency in their work and in the reform was stable over time, since they did not feel that more opportunities for their agency would eventually become available (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011).

The analysis indicated that the manifestations of professional agency emerged in specific temporal situations and moments. For example, teachers made choices on how to take positions towards the reform in its initial stage (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009). However, these manifestations of agency could either change or be maintained over time. Thus, the same teacher could have multiple and even contradictory positions towards the reform at different moments – or, on the other hand, the positions could be more or less permanent (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011; cf. van Veen & Sleegers, 2009). Similarly, the teachers could exercise agency in boundary-crossing settings in a more or less uniform manner through different situations and over time – or

alternatively, the manner could vary, depending on the time that had elapsed and on how the situation developed (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). For example, the teachers with restricted agency were passive actors all the time, while the teachers with relationally emerging agency strengthened their work activities from passive to active in so far as they questioned employees' ways of working over time, once their relationships with the employees became more familiar. One teacher described the importance of the temporal dimension for his agency and for collaboration with employees:

At the start, when the employees do not know you or your professional competencies in the vocational field, they patronize you. When you have shown your competencies over time, there are no problems and collaboration works well... and then you can question their ways of working.

Overall, the meta-analysis highlighted the extent to which professional agency and its manifestations were temporal, in two ways. First of all, the resources for agency seemed to be related to the past, the present, and the future. Secondly, professional agency could be seen as emerging in specific temporal moments and situations; yet at the same time, its manifestations were found to display features of both change and a degree of stability, over time and situations.

9. The importance of professional agency

9.1. Agency and the individual teacher

As emphasized above, teachers' agency plays a key role in negotiating and reshaping professional identity. The analysis further revealed that the creation of diverse conditions for teachers' productive work in boundary-crossing settings seemed to be related to the nature of their agency (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). On the one hand, by being truly active and energetic in their work, teachers were able to productively fulfill their professional duties. On the other hand, when teachers carried out their activities in a humble and passive manner, they did not implement their professional tasks adequately. One example of this was a situation in which a teacher was supposed to discuss a student's workplace learning with the employee within the workplace. At that moment

there was a great rush, and the teacher simply decided to wait around without disturbing the employee. After four hours he left without being able to carry out his task.

The findings further indicated that when the vocational teachers were unable to influence their work contents or to practice their professional interests, doing what seemed meaningful to them, they became dissatisfied and lost commitment to the work organization (Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008; Vähäsantanen et al., 2008). Recently, other scholars have similarly emphasized the significance of teachers' agency, and/or the practice of identity for their satisfaction and organizational commitment (Day & Kington, 2008; Hulpia, Devos & van Keer, 2011). Furthermore, the well-being of many teachers was found to be at stake at the initial stage of the reform (Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008). In particular, those teachers who were active in developing educational practices were concerned about their well-being. They were exhausted, mainly due to having too much work in conjunction with a lack of agency over their work, time, and social resources.

In its later stages, the reform tended to polarize vocational teachers (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). While some teachers seemed to experience increased work satisfaction and commitment, for other teachers the reform seemed to have negative effects on their identity, motivation, well-being, and sense of meaningfulness at work (see also Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008; Day & Kington, 2008; Lasky, 2005). The situation was positive (i) if teachers had opportunities to practice their professional interests, (ii) if they were willing to re-negotiate their identities to correspond with existing social suggestions, using their positive experiences and emotions as resources, or (iii) if they had the ability to be flexible and to adapt to changes despite negative experiences. By contrast, the greatest harm seemed to come when the social demands imposed by the reform conflicted with the teacher's professional identities, at least in cases where teachers lacked the power to influence the content of their work, and further, when they did not have the willingness or resources to re-negotiate their identities (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011). Thus,

one teacher, whose professional identity commitments were related to development duties, but who found that she could not perform them in the reform context, commented as follows:

Since the autumn my motivation has disappeared. It's all I can do to drag myself to work… I was so tired in the spring and to crown it all there were these psychotic cases among the students. So I was just so tired that I was crying and telling the managers that I wanted to do something other than teaching duties, development work… And they didn't listen. I don't know what I should have done, but in my opinion there's definitely something wrong if a person comes to their manager in tears and they say they just can't go on, and nothing happens. So I don't know what I should do. I suppose I should have taken a long spell of sick leave myself.

From the above a key finding emerges that professional agency is closely related to a wide variety of phenomena at the individual level, including productive working and professional identity negotiation. Furthermore, opportunities to influence work practices are important for teachers' organizational commitment, well-being, and work satisfaction.

9.2. Agency and the transformation of social practices

A management culture with strong control over vocational teachers' work might have certain disadvantages at an individual level (as illustrated above), while having advantages at a social level. This is suggested by the situation in which – through strong administrative regulations and teachers' weak agency – it was possible to transform educational practices quickly (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011; Vähäsantanen et al., 2008). The administration continuously imposed changes on educational practices, and the teachers experienced that they had no real opportunities to negotiate or decline the directions laid down. One teacher described the passive role of teachers in relation to the constant development work as follows "*There is no other state besides change. We are constantly waiting for the next demand for change. That is our destiny.*" A similar point was made by another teacher:

The job of a vocational teacher – change is apparently here to stay.... You have to be ready

for changes in curriculum development, and for many other things, practical things too. It is

pointless to stuggle against calls for change, it is not even possible.

Despite the stressful situations mentioned above, one has to bear in mind that the findings are consistent with recent arguments, to the effect that a tight management culture can support the creation and promotion of change (Millward & Timperley, 2010; Priestley, 2011).

Although major changes in education may indeed be achievable when teachers have only minor opportunities to influence the contents of reform, the role of teachers is seen as significant in determining the outcomes of change on a practical level (März & Kelchtermans, 2013). This study showed differences in how vocational teachers involve themselves with reform practices (Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008). It was found, for example, that teachers exhibiting passive accommodation sought to carry out their professional duties without expending too much effort. By contrast, teachers with active participation created new ways of working and innovative educational practices, despite being unable to modify the overall conception of the reform. On the contrary, it has also suggested that teachers can redefine a reform (Imants et al., 2013).

The analysis further revealed that depending on its nature, teachers' professional agency in boundary-crossing situations created diverse conditions for transforming social practices (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009). From the viewpoint of the organization, teachers' boundary-crossing was useful for the purposes of developing education, matching education better to the needs of working life, and bringing new insights to the school from working life. Furthermore, a basis for transforming workplace practices was created when the teachers questioned the working practices of workplace personnel and students, and made proposals for new ways of working (cf. Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). However, not all the teachers exercised agency in a way that made a difference to the existing practices of workplaces, in so far as they were unwilling to voice any criticisms (Vähäsantanen et al., 2009; see also Isopahkala-Bouret, 2010).

To sum up, a major overall finding concerned the importance of teachers' professional agency for transforming educational and work practices. Although it may indeed be the case that major educational changes can be brought about through strong administrative calls and external instructions, it nevertheless appears that teachers' agency is a fundamental element for social transformation in terms of successfully developing educational and working life practices.

10. Conclusions

The main findings of the study concerning teachers' professional agency in the stream of change are summarized in Figure 1. The findings related to the temporal manifestations of professional agency are shown in the middle. Social resources related to agency are illustrated on the left, and individual resources on the right. At the bottom of the figure various phenomena connected with manifestations of professional agency at the individual and social level are summarized.
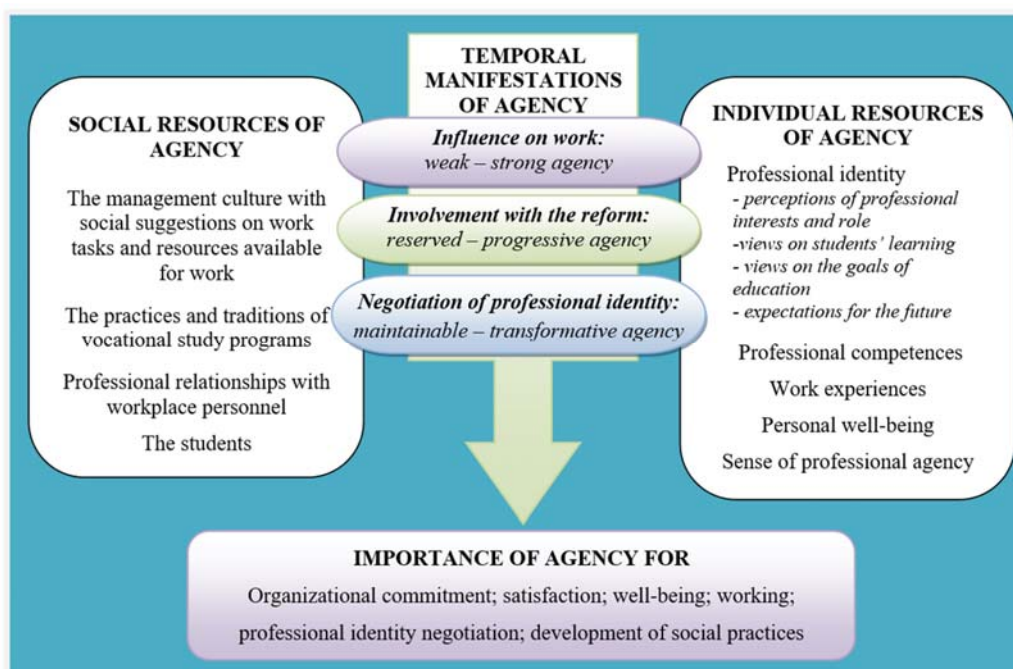

Figure 1 Summary of the findings: professional agency in the stream of change

The fact that this study was conducted in the in a specific change situation occurring within Finnish vocational education is bound to influence the generalizability of the findings. However, in terms of transferability (Patton, 2002; Riessman, 2008) one can suggest that the findings are theoretically and practically applicable to other educational settings, since continuous change in work and in organizations is a familiar phenomenon to many teachers all over the world. The findings may function as a point of reference for researchers who are seeking to elaborate the complexity of educational change and of professional identity negotiation in the process of change. Leaders and practitioners can also utilize the findings for developing educational practices (particularly vocational programs in countries where the integration of work and education is on the agenda) and for supporting teachers amid continuous changes. The theoretical and practical conclusions are presented in the following sections. Future avenues for research are also considered.

10.1. Theoretical notions on professional agency

This paper has explored professional agency as an entity made up of three complementary components, namely *influence on one's own work*, *involvement with an educational reform*, and *the negotiation of professional identity*. Related to these components, the findings revealed the manifestations of vocational teachers' professional agency as falling on a continuum between two extremes, namely (i) *weak, reserved, and maintainable*, and (ii) *strong, progressive, and transformative*. Thus, this study suggests that agency cannot be conceptualized merely in terms of causing change (Giddens, 1984); in fact, the conceptualization of professional agency should include elements of both transformation and maintenance, as these apply to identities and social practices. In this sense, this study supports current views, to the effect that (i) teacher agency in development work can be seen as proactive or as oriented to change; however, (ii) it can also be practiced via oppositional stances and less progressive actions (Priestley et al., 2012; Pyhältö et al., 2012). The study highlights the fact that it is pivotal to recognize all the different manifestations of teacher agency if one is to gain a comprehensive picture of educational change and teacher identity.

Contemporary theorizing conceptualizes teacher agency as closely intertwined with social settings and with other people, and emphasizes the role of social resources and tools for exercising agency (e.g. Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). This paper encriches these views, highlighting the notion that professional agency is related to both individual resources (e.g. *the teacher's professional identity, competencies,* and *work experiences*) and social resources (e.g. *the management culture of the organization* and *the teacher's professional relationships*). According to Priestley et al. (2012) teacher agency is temporal, being related to the past, the present, and the future (see also Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The present study supports this view: the individual and social resources of teacher agency were indeed related to their past, present, and future. Allied to this, professional agency (involving decisions and actions related to the reform) seemed to emerge within specific temporal moments and situations, and the manifestations of agency could either remain stable or change over time and situations. In other words, this study adds to the current literature by demonstrating continuities and transformations in teacher agency over time. Similar findings were obtained among other professionals by Billett (2006).

The findings indicated that the manifestations of professional agency are significant at the individual and social levels. The findings underline the significance of agency for teachers' work behavior, organizational commitment, satisfaction, and well-being at work. Furthermore, professional agency emerges as a fundamental element for the development of educational and workplace practices – at least at micro-level – and for the (re-)negotiation of professional identity. However, the analysis also revealed that a combination of strong external regulations, in association with a lack of extensive opportunities for teachers' agency, may actually have the potential to facilitate large-scale transformations in educational practices. These findings are relevant for the cultivation of educational change, but they also have implications in terms of the need to support teachers in dealing with a changing educational landscape.

Taken as a whole, this study offers a fairly comprehensive perspective on teachers' professional agency. As far as can be determined, professional agency should be conceptualized as

(i) multifaceted and for the most part individually varied, (ii) temporal by nature, (iii) socially and individually resourced, and (iv) significant for individual teachers and for the transformation (or maintenance) of social practices. Concerning the relationship between agency and structure it is possible to argue, in line with März & Kelchtermans (2013), that the relationship is reciprocal; agency seems to be continually mediated by and mediating of change. The educational reform was a mediating entity, leading teachers to practice agency, for example, in terms of negotiating their identities. At the same time, the teachers could both create and retard change at the micro-level of their work, even if they could not influence large-scale change at organizational level. In a similar vein, Kayi-Aydar (2015) sees teacher agency as shaping and being shaped by the social context. Another theoretical conclusion involves a mutual relationship between professional agency and identity. The exercise of agency forms professional identity and establishes its maintenance and transformation; however, professional identity can itself be viewed as a resource for agency. As demonstrated by the study, professional identity was one of the most important lenses through which the teachers made decisions, particularly concerning their positions towards the reform.

10.2. Towards a program for change management and support for teachers

The findings suggest that Finnish vocational teachers' agency is limited in terms of their work practices, and especially the contents of educational reforms. Compared to Finnish primary and university teachers, this situation is deviant. These latter educational settings have not so far adopted to any great extent the kinds of new, startegy-oriented, managerial models and market-oriented educational policies that would narrow teachers' agency at work (Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2014; Sahlberg, 2011).

The paper has a number of implications regarding how educational practices and teachers' empowerment may be cultivated. In recognizing the negative implications of a lack of opportunities for teacher agency (including threats to teachers' organizational commitment), one can suggest that the leadership of educational organizations should do more to promote teachers' professional

agency, in preference to merely disempowering teachers or regulating their work (see also Ravitch, 2013). This applies also to reform contexts. In global terms, vocational teachers' voices have often been marginalized within top-down initiatives in the educational sectors (Billett, 2014). This study showed that although top-down measures can be instrumental in achieving some major changes in educational practices, they can constrain the possibilities of change emerging from teachers' own experiences, and the overall implications for teachers can be negative. From this situation, one can argue for the need to find a balance between teachers' agency and managerial initiatives. Opportunities should be available for teachers' empowerment, so that teachers participate actively in planning and implementation processes (see also Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Priestley et al., 2012), via open and reciprocal dialogue between teachers and managers. Along similar lines, Peck et al. (2009) have emphasized the importance of collective actions for the renewal of educational programs. One practical intervention to enhance educational changes collectively (among teachers and administrators) could be the setting up of dialogical work conferences (e.g. Kalliola & Nakari, 2007). Such events could help to promote collaborative and participatory development, by creating dialogical platforms among various actors in organizations. The guidelines for such events aim at promoting shared discussion, seeking thus to create a vision for the development of the organization. The guidelines further seek to ensure that each participant has the same status in the dialogue, irrespective of official positions, and that the work experience of each participant is valued and heard (Kalliola & Nakari, 2007). This kind of intervention would have the potential to increase teachers' ownership of changes, encouraging them to take more collective responsibility for changes.

Some further implications emerge regarding the construction of vocational educational programs. Akkerman and Bakker (2011) suggest that boundary-crossing involve the possibility for learning. The present study, too, showed that teachers' boundary-crossing is important for developing the practices of education and of working life – this despite the fact that there were different perspectives on the increased boundary-crossing (which occurred among both students and

teachers) particularly when taking a position towards the reform, depending, for example, on the teachers' specific vocational study programs. Undoubtedly, the development of vocational educational programs should include efforts to integrate theory/education and practice/work if there is to be a highly qualified workforce in the labor market (Billett, 2014; Fejes & Köpsén, 2014). However, for sustainable integration – with fewer negative implications for teachers and for students' learning – the uniqueness of different fields should be taken into account. Instead of general guidelines for all the fields, there seems to be a need to create field-specific visions for study programs, for example via dialogical work conferences, as suggested above. For teachers, it takes much more time to guide individual students in workplaces than to instruct many students in classrooms simultaneously. This needs to be acknowledged in calculating teachers' working hours. Here one should note some important research findings on how mobile technology can be used as tool for coaching and communicating with students in their various workplaces (Motta, Cattaneo & Gurtner, 2014).

Working amid changes is challenging for teachers. They are required to assimilate new information and novel educational practices, to negotiate their professional identities, to determine their response to the reform, and to consider their engagment strategies regarding the reform. In the reform context, teachers should be individually supported so that they can deal with changing work conditions at various levels. In the present study, the teachers exhibited a variety of concerns, relating in particular to the performance of professional competencies, their well-being, and their professional identities. The findings highlight a particular need to support teachers' agency in professional identity work, since teachers' identities are at stake when changes occur, and identities do not easily change. At the initial stage of a reform, supporting identity work could include offering opportunities, social dialogue, and time for teachers to become aware of their transformed work roles, and to make sense of their views on the reforms (cf. Geijsel & Meijers, 2005). In the course of the reform, it would further be essential to create opportunities for teachers to make sense of their emotional experiences, so that they can find resources to redefine their identities and their

positions towards the reform, and make the reform efforts part of their working. This would be especially important for teachers who have initially resisted change, since it could work towards a more positive orientation (Zembylas & Barker, 2007).

10.3. Future research avenues

Up to now, the literature has not adequately addressed the importance of different forms of teacher agency for educational change and for teacher identity in the course of specific reforms. The present study theorizes professional agency as a multidimensional phenomenon with individual manifestations – a phenomenon that is temporal in nature, and both socially and individually resourced. Hence, it offers a nuanced perspective, called here an agency-centered approach, for investigating the complexities of change and of professional identity negotiation in a variety of educational contexts. Here it should be noted that quantitative surveys will also be needed if one is to examine professional agency and the transferability of the findings across different contexts. Furthermore, the focus here was on teachers' individual agency, although to a limited extent the paper did consider professional agency at an organizational and community level. Further examination could investigate teachers' collective agency, for example, in terms of how teachers exercise agency together with their colleagues in order to modify professional practices (see also Clegg, 2005; Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2014). Furthermore, emotional aspects cannot be ignored in research on professional agency, since teachers' actions and decisions are not purely rational; after all, emotions are at stake, for example, in the case of professional identity negotiation.

In the primary studies, repeated interviews made it possible to reveal something of the manifestations of agency and its resources within a temporal continuum; these are dimensions that are not revealed by cross-sectional examination. Nevertheless, future work could go further in addressing the temporal elements of professional agency, utilizing a longitudinal research strategy. This could offer more information, illuminating for example the continuities and transformations in teachers' professional identity and pathways in a reform context. Multi-methodological approaches,

including ethnographical approaches, could be used to capture the complex nature of professional agency. In that case, agency could be analyzed by focusing on (i) authentic actions in social practices (via observation), and (ii) the purposes of actions and the decisions beyond them (via interviews) (see also Ahearn, 2001; Ketelaar et al., 2012).

This paper suggested some interventions that could help individuals and organizations to achieve change, through enhancing professional agency. In future it will be necessary to find new tools to support educational organizations in creating sustainable and participative transformations, and to support teachers in the stream of change. The ideal would be that individual professional development and school development would go hand in hand (März & Kelchtermans, 2013). If teachers are not able to transform their identities in line with changes, they are likely to suffer in terms of their motivation and well-being. However, it is not enough to change individuals; there must also be changes in systems, including their organizational and leadership practices (Fullan, 2006).

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