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## Teachers' professional identity negotiations in two different work organisations

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### Abstract

Recent studies have described professional identity as the interplay between individual agency and social context. However, we need to understand how these are intertwined in different kinds of work settings. This paper focuses on teachers' professional identity negotiations as involving the work organisation, the professional community and individual agency. The data were gathered from two work organisations representing different management cultures and sources of control over teachers' work. Open-ended narrative interviews were used, focusing on teachers' own experiences and perceptions. A data-driven qualitative analysis was applied. Our findings indicated that different work organisations provided differing resources for teachers' professional identity negotiations. Teachers were more committed to their work organisation if they had enough agency, if they had opportunities to practise their own orientations towards the profession, and if major changes were not imposed on their working practices from outside.

### 1. Introduction

Traditionally, teachers have had substantial autonomy, especially in matters concerning the content of their work and pedagogy. It has also been thought that teachers' professional

development could be best promoted when the management culture emphasises the autonomy of teachers' work (Hargreaves 2000). Hence, teachers have traditionally been encouraged to be self-directed and reflexive in their work. Work organisations that operate in this way can be described as *loosely coupled* organisations, i.e. consisting of small-scale separated and self-governing teams. In such organisations, individuals and groups are tied together loosely, although they can interact with each other. Management operates via a "flat" management culture, i.e. one in which weak control is exercised. Individuals have the opportunities to oppose social suggestions and reforms, with the likelihood that any changes within such an organisational set-up will be slow and steady (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Weick 1976).

Over recent years, societal changes have moved many organisations towards a new management culture, with a parallel move from loosely coupled organisations to *tightly coupled* organisations. The emphasis is increasingly on strong, strategy-oriented control, aiming at maximum profitability (Meyer 2002; Moos 2005). In education this has led to teachers being increasingly supervised and monitored, to the extent that external evaluations now control the work of the individual teacher. Different professional groups have to co-operate closely with each other and with upper levels of administration: participants are coupled through dense, tight linkages. Educational organisations are seen as accountable, and they are expected to implement continuous external reforms (Meyer 2002; Moos 2005). Strong social control as opposed to professional autonomy is regarded as a prime factor in the professional development of teachers. Although the new management culture has been widely adopted in schooling organisations, we do not yet have a great deal of evidence as to what this implies for teachers' professional orientation and commitment. There is clearly a need to understand how teachers negotiate their professional identities in the present climate, and how they perceive their agency in different work and management cultures.

This paper seeks to investigate teachers' professional identity negotiations in the context of an interdependence between the work organisation, the professional community and individual agency. Using interview data based on Finnish teachers' subjective experiences and perceptions, this paper will consider how two different organisations provide resources for teachers' professional identity negotiations. The differences in the organisations involve the amount of space they allow for individual agency, and the type of management culture they practise. On the basis of the teachers' accounts, the organisations can be described as (i) a tightly coupled organisation, and (ii) a loosely coupled organisation. The study examines professional identity negotiations in terms of how two organisations with different management cultures create constraints and possibilities for teachers to practise their agency and their orientations towards their profession, and to commit themselves to the work organisation. The study is located within a subject-centred socio-cultural framework, and is informed by the literature concerned with the professional identity negotiations of teachers. The key work is reviewed below.

### ***1.1. The professional identity of teachers***

The work of teachers demands the continuous negotiation of professional identity, taken here to embody the individual's perceptions of herself/himself as a professional actor. It includes an individual's sense of belonging, notions of commitment, and values regarding education (Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop 2004; Day, Elliot and Kington 2005; Little and Bartlett 2002). Professional identity is negotiated in the course of the individual's biography. Moreover, it is influenced by future prospects: the person has goals, aspirations, and notions of the kind of professional individual she/he desires to be (Beijaard et al. 2004). Professional core identity is based on those elements which give a sense of meaning and commitment to people in their work (Eteläpelto 2007; Kirpal 2004a; Kirpal 2004b).

In previous studies, the concept of professional identity has usually been related to the teacher's self-image (Knowles 1992), based on the belief that concepts or images of the self determine the way people develop as teachers. In addition, the emphasis has been placed on teachers' roles (Goodson and Cole 1994), or on what teachers themselves see as important in terms of their own personal background and practical experience (Tickle 2000). Professional identity also encompasses moral, emotional and political dimensions, including the teacher's values and interests (Geijsel and Meijers 2005; Hargreaves 1998; Rasku-Puttonen, Eteläpelto, Lehtonen, Nummila and Häkkinen 2004). The study reported here focuses on teachers' orientations towards their profession (van Veen and Slegers 2006; van Veen, Slegers, Bergen and Klaassen 2001), with orientation being defined as the teacher's perception of what is important in her/his work, and the tasks that she/he finds meaningful.

### ***1.2. Professional identity negotiations between personal agency and social suggestion***

Professional identities are constructed in the course of negotiation processes, at the interaction between personal agency and social suggestion (e.g. van Oers 2002). Having agency means being able to make occupational choices concerning one's core work, based on one's own interests and motivations; it means that in relation to social suggestions one is able to act in a way that corresponds to personal values and hopes (Eteläpelto and Saarinen 2006; Fenwick 2006). For its part, social suggestion includes organisational conditions and cultural practices, along with situational demands, constraints and opportunities. The social suggestion can be either weaker or stronger in degree (Billett 2007). The relationship between the personal and the social has been looked at from different theoretical viewpoints. Recognising this, Billett (2006) has distinguished between *humanist*, *structuralist*, *late modernity* and *post-structural* approaches.

The *humanist tradition* assumes that social suggestion is weak, or that it is not present in identity negotiations. Individuals are thought to be able to exercise autonomy in realising their goals, almost independently of social structures. They can freely express their subjectivity and negotiate their identity based on self-actualisation and agency (Mansfield 2000; Rogers 1969). Hence, there are no insurmountable limits to the practice of agency or to individual orientations towards the profession.

*The structuralist approach* assumes that individuals are subjected to social structures and pressures. Professional identity is thought to be strongly shaped by the socio-cultural context of work organisations. The self is developed most fully when the individual adopts the community's norms and values (Foucault 1979; Mead 1934). This means that there are many restrictions in the practice of agency or in maintaining an individual orientation towards one's profession. As compared to structuralist approaches, the *late modernity tradition* offers more space for agency, although identity negotiations are still thought to take place within the limits of social suggestion. Subjects are thought to be self-reflexive, formulating and maintaining their identity agentially within a transforming social system. Subjects both self-regulate and self-subjugate themselves while performing particular roles within and through their working life (du Gay 1996; Rose 1990). In terms of individual orientations towards a profession, individuals will try to achieve a fit between social suggestion and individual values.

In the *post-structural theoretical framework*, identity is presumed to be created via ongoing changes in relations, and in response to cultural practices and discourses. The subject selectively engages and negotiates with social suggestions that are directed at her/him, and the subject's intention is to secure, develop and maintain identity (Fenwick 2006; St. Pierre 2000; Weedon 1997). The subject is formed within specific socio-cultural practices and relationships and as it emerges so too does the subject's capacity to exercise political and moral agency. The

subject can thus resist social structures, outmanoeuvring or avoiding strong social suggestions (Billett 2006; Fenwick 2006).

So far, there has been a lack of research concerning identity negotiations in different work organisations. We therefore need to go beyond the existing research and current theoretical notions, in order to understand the relationships between social context and individual agency, and to try to gain a more elaborated understanding of the interdependence between work organisations and identity negotiations. This paper will examine how teachers' professional identities are negotiated via the interaction between individual agency, the professional community and the work organisation, given that the most prominent social groups that workers belong to are their work organisation and their professional group or community of practice (Baruch and Cohen 2007; Kirpal 2004a). Wenger (1998) has suggested that communities of practice are the place for constructing professional identities, meaning that identities are constructed through participation, and through becoming a member of a professional community. However, Wenger has not greatly thematised the relationships between the individual worker, the professional community and the work organisation.

This study is theoretically informed by a subject-centred socio-cultural framework. In line with a socio-cultural approach (e.g. Lasky 2005; van Oers 2002), we suggest that individuals' identities and social context are mutually constitutive. This means that the cultural resources of communities and organisations provide affordances for individuals' identity negotiations. Nevertheless, since in our view socio-cultural approaches have not thematised subjectivity to a sufficient extent, we have additionally utilised theories that emphasise the role and agency of subjects in a social context (e.g. Fenwick 2006; Weedon 1997). In line with the post-structural approach, we would expect different work organisational contexts and immediate professional communities to create spaces for practising agency, in terms of subjects' individual orientations

towards the profession. We understand that practising agency also means that teachers actively negotiate and renegotiate the conditions and the contents of their own work, and that they have an influence on community and organisational issues. This includes, for example, having the opportunity to renegotiate and to oppose the directions laid down by the administration of the organisation.

### ***1.3. The commitment of teachers***

In this paper, the relationships between the socio-cultural context of work organisations and teachers' professional identity negotiations will be discussed also in terms of commitment, which is an important aspect of identity. Previous studies have shown that commitment to the organisation is strengthened if teachers are able to see the relationship between their professional identity and the strategic directions of their school. Day et al. (2005) found that the factors that most sustained teachers' commitment included (i) sharing with and giving support to colleagues, (ii) positive feedback from colleagues, and (iii) shared educational values within the organisation. Conversely, the factors that most diminished teachers' commitment included (i) the imposition of time-related innovations together with the steep learning curves involved, (ii) department initiatives that increased bureaucratic tasks, (iii) cuts in resources, and (iv) a reduction in classroom autonomy and sense of agency.

In a reform context, teachers have been found to experience disappointments that can weaken their commitment to teaching and work, rooted for example in (i) frustration with shifting levels of endorsement or support from school leaders, (ii) dismay over conflicts with colleagues and/or a failure of support from colleagues, (iii) emotional and physical exhaustion associated with extra and unfamiliar responsibilities, (iv) disagreement over the interpretation of broadly defined reform goals, and (v) tensions over the balance between teacher autonomy and



institutional demands (Little and Bartlett 2002). Baruch and Cohen (2007) have suggested a number of conditions necessary for subjects' commitments. At the organisational level, these include issues such as justice and trust, together with the absence of role conflict or ambiguity. At the individual level, a subject's commitment is influenced by self-efficacy, satisfaction, involvement and a variety of emotions (Baruch and Cohen 2007). On the basis of the studies mentioned above, we could expect that tightly and loosely coupled organisations will produce different strengths of commitment to the organisation.

#### ***1.4. Aims and research questions***

The study reported here sought to gain an understanding of teachers' professional identity negotiations, through an examination of two organisations with different strengths of social suggestion. Thus, this paper focuses on professional identity negotiations in terms of the interrelatedness of the work organisation, the professional community and individual agency. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do teachers perceive the social suggestions of their work organisations, and how are these related to their agency?
2. How do teachers describe their orientations towards the profession, and how are these related to the various social suggestions of their work organisations?

## **2. Research methods**

We interviewed 24 Finnish teachers working in a vocational institution and a university department of teacher education. The teachers who consented to participate in the study varied in age, subject matter, and length of work history in the organisation. The data were obtained by open-ended narrative interviews during 2005–2006. The interviews covered, for example, the

nature of the teacher's work, professional development at work, the work organisation and professional community, and future expectations concerning the work. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The data were analysed in accordance with data-driven qualitative approaches, applying qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006; Patton 2002). We focused on the teachers' individual perceptions and experiences. However, in the analysis, we looked for patterns and common elements that recurred across the different interviews, aiming to produce general characterisations from the interview data.

In the first phase of the analysis, for research question 1, we read through all the 24 interviews, identifying at a general level how teachers described their own work organisations' social suggestions, and how these were related to their agency. From a holistic reading, we noticed that the teachers from the two organisations described their organisations in two different ways, with the management cultures exhibiting particularly striking differences. One of the educational organisations was described as strongly controlling teachers' work practices, and hence (in our terms) representing strong social suggestion. We named this organisation as the "stronger social suggestion organisation". The other workplace was described as less controlling of teachers' work; hence it could be taken to represent weak social suggestion, and was named as the "weaker social suggestion organisation". Our analysis of teachers' perceptions was thus the basis from which we identified two organisations as representing different degrees of social suggestion. A more specific comparative process involved more discussion among the researchers, re-reading the interviews and finding similarities and differences in the teachers' accounts. By thematising we were able to define certain more specific aspects which illustrated the social suggestions of the work organisations. We grouped these aspects, placing them on three levels: *work organisation*, *professional community*, and *individual*. Whilst it could be

argued that the contrastive research strategy used might result in an over-simplification of organisational complexities, our concern was to reflect the teachers' perceptions and experiences. The descriptions of the work organisations should not, therefore, be construed as objective descriptions of the reality within the workplace.

In the second phase, for research question 2, we analysed and interpreted what the teachers said was important to them in their work, including the tasks that were meaningful for them. From the accounts given, we identified and constructed four orientations to the profession. In addition, we examined how the teachers' different orientations towards their profession were related to the social suggestions of their work organisations.

### **3. Findings**

This section is divided into two parts according to the research questions. In the first part, we report on the teachers' accounts of social suggestions within their work organisations, and how these were related to their agency. In the second part, we describe how teachers perceived their orientations towards the profession, and how these were related to the various social suggestions of the work organisations.

#### ***3.1. Teachers' accounts of social suggestions within their work organisations***

The two work organisations had social suggestions that differed in strength. We were thus able to identify two different modes of social suggestions, one belonging to the stronger social suggestion (SSS) organisation and the other belonging to the weaker social suggestion (WSS) organisation. Table 1 summarises the various specific aspects related to the work organisation, the professional community and the individual level. The professional community of the teachers is understood to be a subject-matter group, based on the subject taught.

**- Insert Table 1 about here -**

In the following sections we shall first describe teachers' accounts of the *stronger social suggestion* organisation, on the work organisational, professional community and individual levels. Secondly we shall report on accounts of the *weaker social suggestion* organisation, considering these same levels.

### ***3.1.1. Teachers' accounts in the stronger social suggestion (SSS) organisation***

#### *Work organisational level*

In the stronger social suggestion (SSS) organisation, teachers reported that in recent years they have been faced with continuous, extensive and simultaneous changes: the institution's organisational structure has been substantially altered, and educational reforms both at national and local level have redefined the curricula and the contents of the teachers' work. The suggestion was that organisational definitions of policy and other features of the current reforms have entailed particular duties for the teachers. Teachers noted that they have had to work increasingly outside the educational organisation, with requirements to organise students' learning within the workplace (i.e. outside the school), to provide information about education, and to market education outside their own organisation. In addition, teachers felt increasingly obliged to carry out developmental and administrative duties.

The teachers described their own work organisation as hierarchical and bureaucratic. In the current educational reform situation they did not have a strong sense of agency. They reported that they were powerless to affect the reform, since the reform was planned and organised mainly

by the administration. There were no possibilities for teachers to make their voices heard. This emerged in reports such as the following:

*“Teachers have simply and brutally been told to adopt the current reform, which they must implement. No questions were asked, it’s just an order coming from above... There were no opportunities to have an influence on anything.”* (SSS teacher 5)

Teachers commented that they were required to participate in the implementation of reforms and to do the tasks that were demanded: it was assumed that they would be flexible and dynamic, and that they would take on new roles. According to the teachers, the administration did not provide enough information about the reforms, and did not explain exactly why educational policy in general and the contents of the teachers’ work in particular were continuously undergoing changes. The teachers thought that they would be more committed to the organisational demands if the organisation offered better reasons for them.

The teachers explained that many of the important decisions concerning education, resources, the curriculum and the teachers’ work were made by the organisation’s central administration, mainly without asking teachers’ opinions. Dialogue between the teachers and the administration was non-existent. Teachers were expected to approve the goals determined by the organisation, and to enforce external decisions. As one teacher reported:

*“I’m a bit confused. Let’s say that the message I get is that the individual teacher is no longer listened to as much as before – an order is given as an order and it comes without any reasons for putting it into practice.”* (SSS teacher 15)

The management culture was described as an example of unsatisfactory managership, and the administration was described as having no respect for teachers. The teachers were dissatisfied with the remote possibilities for making decisions, and they wanted to have more influence on the

decision-making process at the organisational level. They hoped that it would be possible to develop the organisation's administrative and structural procedures in a better direction.

*The professional community level*

In the SSS organisation, the professional groups (consisting of teachers who taught the same subject) had no strong sense of having the power to affect broader organisational decisions. Within the professional groups, teachers reported being able to negotiate some concrete issues that had arisen. Collaboration within the professional groups varied, but overall, teachers experienced a lack of extensive collaboration, mainly because of teachers having different timetables. Thus, the organisation was characterised as not offering an ideal setting for teachers to collaborate, and in general the groups did not provide all the teachers with opportunities for professional identification. Moreover, the teachers' learning was inhibited, due to a lack of pedagogical discussions with colleagues and to inadequate feedback. The teachers usually indicated a desire for more collaboration. Those teachers who had experienced extensive collaboration within their own group emphasised the significance of collaboration for their work.

The relationships between the professional groups were variable. The organisation's structural and administrative boundaries were described as working against collaboration among teachers: the professional groups worked in isolation from each other and reported to different administrative bodies. Nevertheless, teachers who had participated in various developmental projects did see themselves as having the opportunity to co-operate with teachers from different subject groups. The teachers' networks with reference groups and partners *outside* their own organisation were quite extensive. In fact, many teachers thought they had better opportunities to consider professional issues and to develop their own competencies with partners who were

outside rather than within the organisation. The organisation did support – and actually demanded – the co-operation of teachers with partners outside the organisation.

#### *The individual level*

In the SSS organisation, teachers did appear to have a certain sense of agency when they were teaching and guiding students. They said that there was no direct supervision of the teachers' work at the most detailed level. However, some teachers reported that the organisation resorted to control when it was discovered that particular teachers did not follow the ways of acting determined by the organisation. The organisation and the managers were not described as supportive, and teachers had to work without feedback or encouragement. Amid the continuous reforms, the teachers stated that they were working in conditions of uncertainty, with no possibilities for long-term planning. The teachers indicated that if the working environment were more stable, it would be easier to use the knowledge and experience they had acquired during their own career.

#### **3.1.2. Teachers' accounts in the weaker social suggestions (WSS) organisation**

##### *Work organisational level*

The teachers in the weaker social suggestion (WSS) organisation also experienced the national and organisational reforms as having an effect on their work. However, they felt that their core work was not under threat and that they could influence their work and the changes involved. They had confidence in the continuity of their work organisation and they did not see the reforms as a threat to their work. On the contrary, these teachers experienced strong agency in relation to the reforms. They indicated that they had the opportunity to negotiate and to oppose the directions laid down by the administration, if they believed that these were threatening their core

work. They described themselves as being able to determine their teaching practices and to develop their work according to their own visions. An example of this was a sense of agency during the curriculum development process. Although the structure of the curriculum was defined at national level, they felt they had the opportunity to engage in the objectives, contents and implementation of the curriculum.

The teachers reported that if they wished, they were able to influence their core work, and in addition to this, the decision-making and other shared issues pertaining to their work organisation. However, the ability to contribute to these issues required familiarity with the practices and conventions of the organisation. The teachers argued that anyone who wished to influence matters of work organisation had to be willing to participate in the groups that were planning these matters. Another way to influence matters could be to directly approach key persons within the organisation. In general, the teachers experienced strong agency, and did not see themselves as hemmed in by administrative structures. As one teacher put it:

*“ There’s freedom here. Freedom. By that I mean that I can affect my own work, I can affect matters within the working community, and if I compare this to my previous work I can say that here I can do whatever it takes to get things done. I can carry out research and develop my teaching.”* (WSS teacher 4)

In the WSS organisation, the teachers reported that they had the chance to negotiate even when faced with the social suggestions offered by central administration. For example, measures such as the development of quality assurance were to some extent viewed positively. On the other hand, there was criticism of some of the measures introduced by central administration. In some cases, the measures put forward were seen as attempts to make teachers implement the strategy of the central organisation without giving them any chance to provide their own perspectives. However, despite these criticisms, teachers indicated that when necessary they were able to



outmanoeuvre suggestions coming from central administration. The possibility of not giving in to strong social suggestions became evident, for example, in the teachers' accounts of their experiences of the development of quality assurance, as part of a set of procedures set up by central administration. If the teachers considered the quality assurance process to be merely "window-dressing", they found ways of avoiding excessive commitment to the process. They produced (as was required) an administrative paper for central administration, their aim being merely to produce the document without spending too much time and energy on it. However, the new salary reform created one exception to the teachers' possibilities to negotiate and resist the social suggestions of central administration. Many teachers highlighted their concern about the growing role of central administration in salary negotiations. The teachers reported that the salary reform had created insecurity, since they did not know the new rules for negotiating in such a changing situation.

#### *The professional community level*

In the WSS organisation, the teachers' particular professional group (comprising teachers who taught the same subject) appeared to be a significant reference group for most of the teachers. The professional group seemed to provide possibilities for professional identification and identity negotiation. Teachers experienced their own group as offering the space and opportunity to discuss and develop their work.

*"My own subject group is the only place where right now or in recent years I have had the chance to discuss various issues properly and in depth, really looking at the work and the work community with all the knowledge and experience a person can have."* (WSS teacher 8)

On the work community level, the power of the different professional groups appeared to be strong. The professional groups had a genuine role to play in issues concerning educational practices. Despite the fact that there appeared to be active negotiation and collaboration within the professional groups, actual collaboration *between* different groups was rare in the WSS organisation. The teachers reported that there had been attempts to develop collaboration between groups, but that these initiatives had not led to permanent changes. However, collaboration and networking with reference groups and partners outside the work organisation was common. The teachers were members of various reference groups outside the organisation, groups that were related to core teaching work and its development. The teachers indicated that networking with other professionals was a natural part of their core work; also that the management of the work organisation had motivated them to make connections and to collaborate with other reference groups.

#### *The individual level*

In the WSS organisation, the teachers experienced strong agency related to their core work. They reported that they could work independently and develop their work as they wished. They experienced no strong social suggestions from the administration concerning their teaching practices.

*“Everyone takes care of their own teaching and then our students get their degrees. That’s our policy, that everyone takes care of their own business. So when everyone is allowed to do their own thing it means you can do whatever you want.”* (WSS teacher 2)

However, the teachers found that as well as being autonomous, the teaching was separated from other teachers’ work. Furthermore, some teachers argued that no-one was interested in the quality

of their teaching. The priorities were merely that the teaching would be carried out, and that the students would get their study credits and graduate within the allotted time.

### **3.2. Teachers' orientations towards their profession, and the relationships of the orientations to the social suggestions of the work organisations**

In the second part of the findings section we shall first describe teachers' orientations towards their profession. Secondly, we shall report on how the teachers' orientations were related to the differing social suggestions within the two work organisations. The relationships between teachers' orientations and social suggestions will be discussed primarily in terms of commitment.

#### ***3.2.1. Teachers' orientations towards their profession***

On the basis of the interviews, we identified four types of orientations towards to the profession: (i) an *educational* orientation, (ii) a *subject-matter* orientation, (iii) a *network* orientation, and (iv) a *research and development* orientation. The orientations should not be understood as unchanging or exclusive, but rather as dynamic, overlapping and renegotiable. They have the following characteristics:

*The educational orientation.* The educationally orientated teachers considered their most important tasks to be educating; also creating a basis for students' individual development, and the construction of students' personal identities. For these teachers, teaching the subject was not the most urgent task; what they wanted to do was focus on the student's personal well-being. They cared about their students, desiring to help them with their problems, to improve their self-respect and to prevent them from becoming marginalised. They wanted to help the students to find their own place in working life and society. They underlined the importance of teaching life-values to students.

*The subject-matter orientation.* When asked about the most important and meaningful tasks of a teacher, the subject-matter-orientated teachers mentioned teaching their subject and helping students to acquire knowledge of and qualifications in the subject. In the school context, they sought to promote the construction of the students' professional identities, in order that the students would have the opportunity to achieve good professional competencies; they also saw it as important that students would know how they should develop their professional competence and knowledge after graduation. They said that the obligation of a teacher is to evoke realistic images of the profession and of different working contexts.

*The network orientation.* While teachers with the educational and subject-matter orientations were primarily focused on teaching activities within the educational institution, the network-oriented teachers had a wider orientation to work. They wanted to act outside the educational institutions, to work with representatives of working life and to collaborate with other educational institutions. The network orientation was also related to the desire to guide students when they had practical training periods outside the actual educational institutions.

*The research and development orientation.* The research and development-oriented teachers thought that their most important tasks – and also their sources of satisfaction – were to be found in research, in the development of education, and in participation in developmental projects. In addition, their purpose in life was to market and to provide information on their own subject, on a nationwide basis.

### ***3.2.2. Teachers' orientations towards their profession within the stronger social suggestion (SSS) organisation***

In the stronger social suggestion (SSS) organisation, the teachers did not have strong agency at the organisational level. This means that they considered themselves to be powerless to affect the

larger definitions of policy, or the reforms. In addition, the organisation did not offer space for teachers to negotiate the contents of their work; on the contrary the organisation laid down duties that teachers had to carry out. In particular, the teachers were increasingly being required to work outside the schooling organisation, and to participate in developmental and administrative duties. Nevertheless, the SSS organisation did not simply constrain, but also opened up opportunities for teachers to practise their orientations towards the profession, depending on what the orientation might be.

In the SSS organisation the *educational* and the *subject-matter-orientated* teachers argued that they were no longer able to practise their orientations freely, or not as much as before. The organisational demands were in conflict with the teachers' orientations; as a result, professional identity was threatened and the teachers were fairly dissatisfied. For this reason, they tended to disagree with organisational instructions, which were seen as conflicting with good practice – or indeed with reality – and as obstructing their core work. The teachers argued that many students had personal problems and learning difficulties which required a supportive teacher, at the same time as central administration wanted the teachers to concentrate on other duties. For these teachers, the ideal situation would be one in which they would concentrate only on educating; in such a case their work would actually be meaningful. Not all the teachers in these categories felt a strong commitment to the organisation, and they made it clear that their commitment would be further weakened if their job descriptions continued to undergo change. This can be seen in the following extract:

*“... the teacher's job description is being altered; tasks outside teaching are being increased and the teachers are required to have more organising and planning skills. It's a minor concern. I'm not the kind of person that likes to organise and plan. I'm more of a practical doer. It could end up with things becoming too fraught and difficult. If I feel that*

*I'm having to work more as a planner and a developer than as a teacher, at some point I'll probably think about doing some other job.” (SSS teacher 10)*

However, some of the teachers with educational and subject-matter orientations did not want to leave the organisation, or else they thought that they had no other option than to commit themselves to the organisation. For example, they might not have the competencies to move into other professions.

In the SSS organisation, the *network*-orientated teachers, and also the *research and development*-orientated teachers, were able to maintain their own orientations towards the profession. The teachers who experienced a balance between their orientations and social suggestions mainly had a positive attitude to their profession and to the organisational demands. Some of these teachers would actually have liked more opportunities to participate in development and to decrease their traditional teaching activities. Yet although the network-oriented teachers and the research and development-oriented teachers had the chance to practise their orientations, not all of them were completely satisfied with their work. The problem was a lack of time and resources. Teachers had to be flexible and to work during their leisure time. Furthermore, the lack of a supportive organisation and of resources hindered teachers from doing their core work in the way they wanted. They were innovative and enthusiastic about their developmental duties, but argued that the organisation did not give them enough resources, agency or authority. In this situation, the teachers were becoming increasingly exhausted:

*“... Powerless is one reason for stress... [Previously] we had plenty of power and agency as a team; we could do everything as a team... Everybody felt extremely good about it. Now little by little we've been whittled away. Now everything is being imposed from above. Teams no longer have any power. It's tragic. Right now, when what is needed is energy, some kind of creativity and development, all the power has been taken away... We've*

*developed things and stuck our necks out... At some point we might take a bit of a different approach. After all, this is just a job. Otherwise I feel that in our study programme we may simply not be able to carry on.*" (SSS teacher 3)

In the SSS organisation, the teachers had inconsistent attitudes to the changes. On the one hand, some teachers were willing to admit the need for educational reforms. On the other hand, some teachers reported that the reforms were unnecessary and were having negative effects. In addition, the continuous changes were described as being stressful and exhausting, and some teachers wished for stability and continuity. Without this, they would become increasingly cynical and lacking in commitment, due to concerns about their own personal well-being.

### ***3.2.3. Teachers' orientations towards their profession within the weaker social suggestion (WSS) work organisation***

In the weaker social suggestion (WSS) organisation, too, the teachers reported that external authorities (such as the Ministry of Education or the central administration of the organisation) had an influence on their core teaching work and on the resources available. Nevertheless, they indicated that they had opportunities to negotiate and to resist pressures, if this was needed. In the WSS organisation, social suggestions and administrative structures did not seem to fundamentally obstruct orientations towards the profession. The data suggested that teachers were able to negotiate and work meaningfully, regardless of their orientations toward the profession. They thus experienced a balance between their orientations towards the profession and the social suggestions provided by the work organisation:

*"... the best thing in this set-up is that you can influence your work as much as a person can do. I'd feel outraged if I had to obey instructions given by others."* (WSS teacher 7)

However, in the WSS organisation, just as in the SSS organisation, the teachers had found that administrative work had increased considerably in recent years. In their everyday work this was apparent in the increased amount of administrative planning and meetings. However, there was a clear potential for negotiation in the teachers' work. In any case, many teachers did wish to participate in the various working and planning groups in the organisation. The teachers explained that by participating they had opportunities to prepare proposals and to have an impact on matters central to their core work. In the WSS organisation the teachers reported that it was possible for them to exert influence, particularly through the administrative and planning groups. Another pivotal negotiation strategy was direct contact with key persons within the organisation. The WSS organisation offered many possibilities for this kind of negotiation. The data also suggest that both the work community and the organisation as a whole provided a considerable number of possibilities for teachers to construct their professional identities. The teachers were very committed to their work, and to developing it. They also expected to continue working in the organisation in the future.

*“ I have clear vision that I want to work in the department and develop myself here, and also play my own part in the development of this department... yes, I intend to continue here and develop, and I think it is good that I can affect this development, including when and how quickly it happens. (WSS Teacher 6)*

Generally speaking, the teachers were not unduly suspicious of change or organisational development. On the contrary, some teachers even expected it. However, it seemed essential to teachers that organisational development should be led by them rather than by central administration or another outside body. At the same time, some teachers emphasised that if an administrative or external source was not willing to force change, no changes would take place at all.



### ***3.2.4. The relationships between teachers' orientations towards their profession and the social suggestions of the work organisations***

All in all, we found varying relationships between teachers' orientations towards their profession and the social suggestions of the work organisations. The SSS organisation and the WSS organisation imposed different constraints on teachers; they also provided different opportunities for teachers to practise their agency, in terms of pursuing their professional orientations (Table 2).

**- Insert Table 2 about here -**

Depending on the teacher's orientation, the SSS organisation could either constrain or promote the orientation. The core aspects of the educational and subject-matter-orientated teachers' professional identities were becoming eroded by strong social suggestions and continuous changes. By contrast, the network-oriented teachers and the research and development-oriented teachers did find opportunities to practise their orientations towards the profession. The management culture of the SSS organisation could be compared to the new public management culture. Having experienced this management culture, some of the teachers reported a lack of commitment, because of the continuous changes, the constraints on agency, and the difficulties in practising their orientations towards the profession. However, even under strong social suggestions, some teachers did feel a certain sense of agency, in the sense that they were able to control their own sense of commitment. They did not have to commit themselves to the organisation, provided they had enough professional competencies and personal resources to leave the organisation.

In the WSS organisation, by contrast, all the teachers expressed the view that they had the opportunity to specify their core work and negotiate the contents of their work; also, when necessary, to oppose the directions offered by central administration if they saw these directions as affecting their core work. This possibility to negotiate gave teachers the chance to practise their orientation, regardless of the nature of their orientation. Further findings showed that the teachers were committed to their work in the WSS organisation, in a place where they had the chance to practise agency and to act on their own orientations towards the profession. In other words, a “flat” management culture, one that emphasised the agency of the teaching profession, promoted teachers’ commitment to their work organisation and to teachership.

#### **4. Conclusions and discussion**

The findings, which were based on an analysis of teachers’ subjective experiences, highlight many issues that deserve further investigation. The findings showed that the stronger social suggestion organisation placed more restrictions on opportunities to practise agency and to act on orientations towards the profession; it also created continuous expectations of change. Conversely, in the weaker social suggestion organisation, teachers were able to negotiate the content of their work, practise agency and act on their orientation towards the profession, regardless of what the orientation might be. The findings showed that the weaker social suggestion organisation, i.e. the loosely coupled organisation, created a work environment in which teachers were relatively more committed to the organisation. It appeared that teachers were more committed to the work organisation if they had enough professional agency, if they had opportunities to practise their own orientations towards the profession, and if their working practices were not subject to externally imposed major changes. The findings are in line with the results of other studies addressing the conditions of commitment (Day et al. 2005; Little and

Bartlett 2005). However, our findings further suggest that individual agency and social suggestion are closely intertwined, being mediated in professional identity negotiations through subjects' commitment. This aspect is often neglected in discussions concerning the interdependence between individual agency and social suggestion.

Recent changes in work organisations, with more flexible employment patterns, have increasingly meant that classical forms of work-related identity formation (e.g. belonging to particular work-based communities) have undergone significant changes (Kirpal 2004a). Although it is important for teachers that they can practise agency and orientations, this study also underlines the significance of the immediate professional community (i.e. a subject-matter group) for teachers' identity negotiation. Indeed, the professional community was very important for the teachers. Those who lacked membership of such a community had a keen sense of what was missing. Similarly, many teachers would have liked more collaboration within professional communities, if they experienced such collaboration as being limited. We can thus conclude that a teacher's immediate working community, and the collaboration it allows, has the potential to provide a safety net against external changes. In addition, the immediate professional community can promote teachers' individual agency in work organisations. Our findings imply that the essential conditions for teachers' successful negotiations of their professional identity include sufficient individual agency and the opportunity to belong to a supportive and safe professional community. Such conditions were provided in the weaker social suggestion organisation representing the loosely coupled organisation.

However, one aspect that was experienced as troubling in the weaker social suggestion organisation – in which the relationships between professional groups were weaker – was the fact that the different groups did not share experiences and knowledge. Furthermore, it would appear that strong agency among teachers and self-governing work groups is a factor tending to prevent

organisational change. Our findings thus support the suggestion of Nonaka and Takeushi (1995), who argue that organisational development and learning can be inhibited if individuals merely develop their own professional knowledge and competence, separately from their own organisation, and without transfer of their knowledge within the organisation. Conversely, the stronger social suggestion organisation with its new public management culture organised continuous reforms which were supposed to develop the organisation and the education it provided. Yet although strong social suggestions appeared to facilitate organisational change, our findings suggest that the imposition of work changes from external sources, along with expectations of continuous change, can impact negatively on teacher commitment. The organisation with stronger social suggestion would have needed more dialogue between the teachers and the administrators. In such a case, the experience and knowledge of the teachers could also be better exploited within the reform process.

What emerges the findings is that – for the sake of commitment and professional identity negotiation – it would be important for an individual to have enough opportunities to practise agency within the organisation. In the case of an educational organisation, this includes the possibility for teachers to practise their individual professional orientations, to actively negotiate and renegotiate the conditions and the contents of their own work, and to have an influence on issues arising on community and organisational levels. Moreover, in terms of teachers' agency, it is not enough that they can practise agency only in their own teaching work. In addition to this, there must be a chance to gain support from the immediate professional community, as well as the possibility of selecting and resisting organisational suggestions. We would thus argue that in theoretical discussions concerning agency, it is vital that there is consideration of all the three levels mentioned above (i.e. the organisational, community and individual levels).

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Table 1: Teachers' accounts of organisations with stronger and weaker social suggestions, with their perceived possibilities for negotiation at work organisational, professional community and individual levels

	<b>Stronger social suggestion (SSS) organisation</b>	<b>Weaker social suggestion (WSS) organisation</b>
<b>WORK ORGANISATIONAL LEVEL</b>		
<b>Organisational culture</b>	Continuous changes	Stable
<b>Management</b>	Hierarchical	Low hierarchical
<b>Teachers' perceived opportunities for resistance to change</b>	Low	High
<b>Space for individual negotiation of agency</b>	Limited	Extensive
<b>Teachers' perceived power to affect matters</b>	Low	Variable
<b>PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY LEVEL</b>		
<b>Perceived power of professional groups</b>	Low	High
<b>Collaboration within professional groups</b>	Variable	Variable
<b>Relationships between professional groups</b>	Variable	Low
<b>Networks outside the</b>	Strong	Strong

<b>organisation</b>		
<b>INDIVIDUAL LEVEL</b>		
<b>Teachers' perceived agency in teaching</b>	High/variable	High

Table 2: The relationships between teachers' orientations and the social suggestions of the work organisations

	<b>Stronger social suggestion (SSS) organisation</b>	<b>Weaker social suggestion (WSS) organisation</b>
<b>Educational orientation</b>	Conflict	Balance
<b>Subject-matter orientation</b>	Conflict	Balance
<b>Network orientation</b>	Balance	Balance
<b>Research and development orientation</b>	Balance	Balance