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Agency-centred coupling – a better way to manage an educational organization?

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Abstract

Teachers at the present time face continuous changes in their work and organizational practices. However, we lack empirical evidence as to what this implies for teachers and their work. This paper describes how two Finnish educational organizations restrict or enable teachers' professional agency, in terms of how the teachers influence the conditions and contents of their work. The paper further addresses how agency is related to (i) organizational and educational transformations, (ii) teachers' professional development and identity negotiations, and (iii) teachers' commitment to the educational organization and well-being at work. This paper provides the comparative research evidence on both the strengths and weaknesses of different management practices of different educational organizations, identified here as a loosely coupled organization and a tightly coupled organization. It seems that strong agency supports teachers' diverse learning, the practice of their professional orientations, and also their well-being and commitment. Conversely, all these are threatened by teachers' weak agency. However, teachers' strong agency as individuals also appears to act as a brake on organizational transformation and collective learning. Based on our findings, we suggest novel future directions for the management of educational organizations and for the leadership of teachers' work in terms of agency-centred coupling practices.

Keywords: agency, commitment, learning, loosely coupled management, new public management, organizational change, professional identity, teachers, tightly coupled management, well-being.

Introduction

Teachers' changing work conditions: tight management and a modified form of coupling

This paper provides new research-based knowledge on the strengths and weaknesses of different ways of managing educational organizations, with implications at both individual and social levels. It further suggests novel directions for the management of educational organizations in the future. Issues of educational management are globally important, since in recent decades educational restructuring has become a world-wide phenomenon. One clear global trend has been a movement towards neo-liberal economic policies (with a focus on decentralization, output, competition, and strong leadership) and accountability (with a focus on centrally imposed standards, and quality criteria) (Moos et al. 2008, Lindblad and Goodson 2010). One facet of this trend is the form of governance labelled New Public Management (NPM), which has crossed from the world of business into education. The changes in the patterns of governance in education have led to more exercising of authority at local government and school levels, especially in Scandinavia (Helgøy et al. 2007, Moos 2009). In parallel with this process, educational organizations are now required to be more accountable, and to accept new systems of monitoring, reporting, and evaluation (Moos 2005, Helgøy et al. 2007, Hudson 2007). This has meant that the work of teachers, too, is becoming increasingly monitored and controlled (Day 2002, Sohlberg et al. 2010) – a trend that runs counter to the traditional high level of independence given to teachers in deciding what and how they teach, and how they can develop themselves and their work (Hargreaves 2000, Hargreaves and Shirley 2009). All in all, it seems that in the context of market competition and educational standardization, professional independence and a culture of trust are being replaced by ideals of efficacy, productivity, and rapid service delivery (Hargreaves and Shirley 2009, Sahlberg 2011).

In parallel with the adoption of NPM principles, the transformations in educational systems have been conceptualized as a movement from "loose" to "tight" coupling patterns (Meyer 2002). "Coupling" here refers to linkages between different elements within a system, including

organizational members, hierarchical levels, organizational subunits, organizations, and their environments (Orton and Weick 1990, Rowan 2002, Spillane et al. 2011). Weick (1982) specified loose coupling in terms of disparate elements affecting each other occasionally rather than constantly, negligibly rather than significantly, indirectly rather than directly, and eventually rather than immediately (see Orton and Weick 1990). In loosely coupled organizations the elements and actors are to a considerable extent separated or present in only a loose association, even if they can interact with each other (Weick 2001, Meyer and Rowan 2006). This means that the teacher's work is only loosely tied to that of other teachers or to the administrative structures of the school. In loosely coupled educational organizations any changes that occur will be small-scale, unplanned, occasional, and individual, since the professional independence of teachers provides a buffer against efforts by the administration to change established practices (Weick 1976, Orton and Weick 1990, Meyer and Rowan 2006).

As opposed their former loosely coupled operations, educational organizations are now tending towards tighter coupling in their networks and hierarchies (Meyer 2002, Meyer and Rowan 2006). In tightly coupled organizations the various actors and professional groups are not isolated: they are obliged to co-operate closely with each other and with different levels of administration (Orton and Weick 1990, Moos 2009). A feature of tight coupling is the possibility to implement continuous and large-scale changes, with the aim of achieving maximum profitability and effectiveness through strategic planning and direction (Meyer 2002, Rowan 2002). In education, the tightened management has meant that teachers must increasingly face top-down control and external evaluations.

In Finland educational organizations have traditionally been organized via principles that emphasise teachers' autonomy and professionalism. For example, in basic education all teachers have the freedom to plan, implement and assess their own teaching within the framework of the national curriculum. Furthermore, in Finland there is no standardized testing, and no school inspection or official ranking lists. It could thus be claimed that there is a culture of responsibility

and trust rather than one of accountability. Despite this, Finland achieves high performance in international assessments, without undertaking constant public measures of performance (e.g Hargreaves and Shirley 2009; Sahlberg 2010). Although within Finland notions of the autonomy and professionalism of teachers have guided education for decades, calls for a tightening of educational management have increasingly been heard (Kivirauma et al. 2012).

Given the increase in NPM and tight coupling principles in education, it is vital to understand what this means for teachers and their work (see also Moos et al. 2008, Goodson and Lindblad 2010), and this will involve issues that have been somewhat neglected in empirical studies. In Finland the recent global trend towards tight management and accountability has raised questions of whether to follow this trend in educational management, or whether to keep to the well-established and apparently successful Finnish model. In this paper, we shall show how, within Finland, differently managed educational organizations affect teachers' work, and also educational transformations. For this purpose we shall look closely at how two (tightly and loosely coupled) educational organizations constrain or promote the professional agency of teachers (teacher educators and vocational teachers). This will allow us further to consider how the professional agency of the teachers is related to (i) organizational and educational transformations, (ii) teachers' professional development and identity negotiations, and (iii) teachers' commitment to their educational organization and well-being at work. Since the evidence – for both types of organization – reveals both opportunities and constraints, we shall attempt to pursue our broader aim, which is to suggest the kinds of couplings within educational organizations that may be most favourable for educational organizations and teachers.

Theoretical perspectives on agency

The concept of agency includes the idea that people are active, exercising at least some degree of control over their lives; they do not merely react to or repeat given practices (Biesta and Tedder 2007, Hodkinson et al. 2008, Lipponen and Kumpulainen 2011). In education, agency often refers

to subjects' purposeful decisions and actions; hence the concept of agency includes notions of power and the exerting of influence (Gordon 2005, Fenwick and Somerville 2006, Billett 2008, Vähäsantanen et al. 2009). Such influence can be directed at one's work, career, and identity, and further to institutional and societal circumstances (Billett and Somerville 2004, Hitlin and Elder 2007, Isopahkala-Bouret 2010). All in all, it is meaningful to talk about agency as existing only when the individual has power to act – to affect matters, make decisions and choices, or bring about some kind of change in a prevailing situation (Eteläpelto et al. 2011).

With these considerations in mind, we understand that practising professional agency means in particular that teachers are able to negotiate the conditions and contents of their work, and to influence community and organizational issues, including educational reforms (see also Hökkä 2012, Vähäsantanen 2013). Teachers' agency is strong if they are able to be active subjects in influencing the practices that are meaningful to them in their work, and conversely, their agency is weak when they lack such opportunities. In line with this, teachers may perceive themselves as active subjects in terms of developing education – persons whose actions, opinions, and ideas truly matter; or alternatively, they may see themselves as outsiders or passive objects whose actions are mainly regulated by external actions (Pyhältö et al. 2012). In the present paper, professional agency is also understood as manifested through being able to learn at work, and through negotiating career pathways and professional identities (Lasky 2005, Hodkinson et al. 2008, Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto 2011, Hökkä et al. 2012).

In this paper, we further understand professional agency as a relational phenomenon, one that is intertwined within socio-cultural conditions and suggestions (with such suggestions being taken to include organizational conditions and cultural practices, plus situational demands, constraints, and opportunities; see Billett 2007). In the case of teachers, these social suggestions also include such matters as policy mandates, curriculum guidelines, and national standards. They further involve the resources available to the teacher, the subject positions within discourses, and the norms of the teacher's educational organization (Lasky 2005, Hökkä et al. 2010). In addition to the social

aspects, agency is here seen as intertwining with subjects' professional interests, values, and backgrounds (Billett 2006, Eteläpelto and Saarinen 2006). Overall, we understand professional agency as teachers' power to influence their identities, work, community and organizational issues, within the prevailing socio-cultural conditions, in an intertwining relationship with their subjective backgrounds.

Research projects: Purposes, methods and contexts

This paper is based on two research projects conducted by the authors, and on the main findings of these projects. These projects were conducted as individual studies within a larger research project (PROFID) that aimed to investigate professional identity negotiations and learning in creative knowledge work and human-centred work. The research projects mainly shared similar purposes, but the empirical data were gathered from different contexts within the Finnish educational system. During the projects, the potential utility of comparing the findings of the two separate projects was observed; this would make it possible to broaden the picture of different management models in educational organizations, and to determine how these models are connected to teachers' work and educational change. The findings of the two separate projects have been reported in a number of papers (from 2008 to 2012).

In this paper, we shall produce a new synthesis of the main findings of the research projects as they relate to organizational management and coupling patterns in different educational organizations. To this end, we shall characterize teachers' professional agency and its multifaceted significance for individual teachers and educational organizations. In so doing we shall produce new knowledge concerning the management of educational organizations, thereby contributing to discussions on how educational organizations can be managed in a sustainable way. Below, we shall outline the purposes and methods of the research projects, the research contexts, and the educational organizations; these were looked at particularly in terms of recent educational transformations faced by the organizations in question.

Research project A

This research project examined opportunities and obstacles pertaining to teacher educators' professional development, and how these are related to organizational change. The project investigated teacher educators' professional identity negotiation, their professional agency, and their participation in shared practices and meaning construction. The project was conducted in a Finnish teacher education department within a large multidisciplinary Finnish university.

In Finland, the education of all class teachers and most subject teachers takes place within the university sector. Thus, recent transformations in the university sector have had a direct influence on teacher education. Teacher education and teacher educators have faced new demands concerning (for example) curriculum reforms, salary reforms, quality assurance, and organizational re-structuring. Within these reforms, the transformations in the curriculum can be seen as the most pivotal, since these directly affect the work of teachers and the implementation of education. In the teacher education department under study, the curriculum development was connected to reforms implemented as part of the "Bologna process", whose aim has been to create a common European Higher Education Area by standardizing academic degrees and quality assurance standards throughout Europe (Jakku-Sihvonen and Niemi 2006). However, within Finland, national networks and projects have further contributed to the structure of the curriculum and have offered national guidelines to universities. Thus, the structure of the new curriculum has in many respects been determined through external regulations, negotiated within both the Bologna and the national context. Nevertheless, the teacher education department has had a high degree of independence in negotiating and developing the main objectives, the structure, and the implementation of the new curriculum.

The main data for this research project were gathered through in-depth, open-ended interviews with eight teacher educators in the course of 2005. The teacher educators were selected through purposeful sampling (Silverman 2005) as key informants representing different categories

of age, academic status, subject taught, and length of work history in the department. The data were complemented by a research diary kept by the author during 2002–2006, while she was working in the department in question. The data were analysed via a qualitative approach, applying thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), qualitative content analysis (Patton 2002, Hsieh and Shannon 2005), and discursive analysis (Potter and Wetherell 1987, Edley 2001).

Research project B

This research project aimed to investigate vocational teachers' professional agency amid changing work practices. The project covered the manifestations and resources of agency, as demonstrated through the negotiation of professional identities, involvement with a curriculum reform, and influence on work and reform practices. The project was conducted in a single Finnish vocational institution in the course of a curriculum reform.

In the field of Finnish initial vocational education and training (VET) (upper secondary education, students mainly aged 16 to 19), teachers have faced many educational transformations. The system for initial VET has traditionally been school-based, which means that vocational competencies have mainly been taught to students by teachers within the vocational institutions. Over recent years, the system of initial VET has been extensively transformed at both national and local levels. The main aim has been to break down the traditional separation between schools and workplaces and to introduce a system for students' workplace learning (see also Virtanen et al. 2008, Isopahkala-Bouret 2010). In the vocational institution examined for this study, the most recent curriculum reform aimed to increase the amount of students' workplace learning from the national minimum of 20 credits (out of 120 credits) to 40–60 credits of workplace learning. New educational practices have challenged the traditional position of vocational teachers, who have faced a need to adapt to new and expanded roles and work tasks. Increasingly, their work includes matters such as organizing, guiding, and evaluating students' workplace learning, finding workplaces for the

students, and supporting those workplace employees who will act as trainers during students' workplace learning (Virtanen et al. 2008).

The data for this research project consisted of narrative interviews with sixteen vocational teachers in 2006, and of repeated interviews with fourteen of these teachers in 2007. The teachers were selected on a voluntary basis, out of those teachers who were at the forefront of the implementation of the new curriculum. During the first interviews, the teachers (ten males and six females) were aged 31–57 years, with teaching experience ranging from 4 to 30 years. They taught in various study programmes belonging to different fields of initial vocational education. The interview data were analysed via a qualitative approach, applying mainly narrative analysis (e.g. Lieblich et al. 1998, Riessman 2008), together with thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), and qualitative content analysis (Patton 2002).

These two research projects, conducted in two different educational organizations in Finland, offered good possibilities for elaborating teachers' professional agency and its implications at both individual and social levels. In fact, the data for this comparative study were collected at a favourable time, since at this time the two educational organizations were managed according to different models, and were at different stages in terms of adopting tighter managerial practices. In the case of research project A the management of the organization operated according to loosely coupled principles. By contrast, in research project B the organization was undergoing a major transformation towards tighter management, including a new culture of accountability and monitoring (representing trends that remain current worldwide). This kind of variation between the organizations was fruitful in terms of comparing (possibly) positive and negative management practices, with implications at both individual and social levels.

Below, we shall synthesize and discuss the main findings from the research projects. As a first step, we shall describe how these two educational organizations restrict or enable teachers' professional agency, in terms of how the teachers are able to influence and negotiate the conditions and contents of their work.

Teachers' professional agency within the loosely and tightly coupled organizations under study

In the interviews, teachers' accounts of their organizations varied considerably. The differences pertained in particular to the management of the organization and to the strength of management control over teachers' work. From the accounts of the teachers interviewed and through qualitative analysis (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006) the organizations were defined as (i) a loosely coupled organization (the teacher education department), and (ii) a tightly coupled organization (the vocational institution) (Vähäsantanen et al. 2008). The classification of the organizations was inspired by theoretical concepts of organizational management models (e.g. Weick 1976). Here it should be emphasized that the descriptions of organizations as "coupling" systems represent ways of thinking about an organization rather than technical descriptions of a specific organizational structure. Broadly speaking, the organizations described in this paper appear to exemplify "loose" and "tight" coupling, in terms of the opportunities and constraints they provide for teachers' agency. It must also be emphasized that in fact, educational organizations and organizational segments always contain a mixture of tightness and looseness (Weick 2001). Nevertheless, we take the view that a contrast of particular organizations in terms of their "coupling" characteristics may prove illuminating, and give certain pointers towards what "best practice" might include.

The loosely coupled organization. In the case of the teacher education department some aspects of tightening management were being implemented through reforms affecting curriculum development, salary reforms, and a quality assurance process. In spite of these reforms, teacher educators described their work and their opportunities to act in their educational organization in ways that exemplified loose coupling principles. This implies that the teacher educators' sense of professional agency was relatively strong as regards their own core work, i.e. their teaching work, and also as regards negotiating the content and implementation of their work (Hökkä et al. 2008):

> I can affect my own work to an enormous extent. And just because everyone can take care of their own job, you can do whatever takes your fancy.

They reported that although there had been reforms and various suggestions for changes, they were able to resist these and to do their core work as they wished. The teachers reported that they were able to negotiate or resist instructions coming from central administration, if these seemed likely to threaten their personal ways of conducting their teaching. In opposing administrative demands they used a variety of strategies, including ignoring the instructions and continuing to work as previously, or implementing the demands with as little effort as possible.

The tightly coupled organization. In the case of the vocational institution, major changes had recently taken place in the structure and management culture of the organization. The vocational teachers described their organization as hierarchical, controlling, and restrictive, and saw this as resulting from the changes that had taken place. The teachers' work was said to be increasingly controlled through administrative regulations. They reported that they had no extensive opportunities to influence the conditions and contents of their work, and said that permission concerning their core work often had to be obtained from managers (Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto 2010, 2011). One teacher described the weak sense of professional agency as follows:

> I feel that the governance of the organization is becoming more and more authoritarian. Teachers' opportunities to exert influence are decreasing all the time and the twittering of the weak and feeble teacher is becoming lost in this huge, grandiose organization.

All in all, the teachers described this organization in terms indicative of tightly coupled principles. In many cases, the role of the teachers was merely to implement external instructions – which were given without any proper explanation (Hökkä et al. 2008). In this kind of situation the teachers wanted the couplings between administration and teaching work to be loosened, with more

opportunities for teachers to participate in decision-making and to influence their work. As one teacher put it:

> 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.

In the following sections, we aim to show how the opportunities and constraints affecting Finnish teachers' professional agency in loosely and tightly coupled organisation were related to (i) the transformations in education and educational organizations, (ii) teachers' professional identity negotiations and development, and (iii) teachers' commitment to their organization and well-being at work.

Organizational and educational transformation

Educational organizations are required to change from within and to develop continuously in parallel with societal development (Meyer 2002). Teachers are often seen as the main actors in organizational and educational transformations.

In investigating organizational and educational transformations, we noticed that in the loosely coupled organization, the teacher educators described their organization as stuck in an old-fashioned culture of traditional teaching. They had found organizational development to be a slow and difficult process. All the projects and development efforts aimed at changing the working practices – and more broadly the whole organization – were seen as fragile and unproductive. In fact, the development efforts that were carried out by the teachers themselves were also seen as ineffective, from the point of view of achieving real changes (Hökkä et al. 2008). These findings are in line with notions of loosely coupled organizations as powerful systems that are able to buffer and resist external reforms (e.g. Orton and Weick 1990, Swanson and Steveson 2002). In the loosely

coupled organization the teachers saw this situation as problematic. One teacher described the stasis of curriculum development in the following words:

> Here there is a kind of horror scenario that means that things just roll on as they did before… that the outer trappings of the curriculum change but the implementation and content of the curriculum stays the same. The changes are so slow and tiny that too many generations of students will just slide on by in the same old way.

One fundamental aspect connected to organizational and educational transformations in the loosely coupled organization was teachers' strong agency as individuals in their work. The teachers' strong professional agency was manifested as a possibility to protect their own core work and its stable conditions and resources. This nurtured and maintained an individual working culture, and thus strengthened barriers between different subject-matter groups. Overall, these barriers appeared to hinder collaboration, boundary-crossing, and shared meaning-construction between the various professional groups – and between teacher educators generally, thus impeding organizational learning (Hökkä et al. 2010). This can be seen as problematic, given that the importance of collaboration in developing the quality of educational organizations has recently been emphasized by many scholars (e.g. Margolin 2007, Helleve 2010), and that studies have particularly highlighted the importance of boundary-crossing in teaching and learning (Niemi and Jakku-Sihvonen 2006, Savin-Baden and Major 2007).

In this organization teachers' accounts concerning the curriculum process reflected strong professional agency; they reported that they had opportunities to influence the objectives, contents, and implementation of the curriculum (Hökkä et al. 2008, 2010). Importantly, the curriculum process was in large measure described as an internal resource competition between different subject-matter groups within the organization. Within this process, the teachers' strong agency was portrayed as important in protecting one's own subject-matter and its resources during educational transformations. This created a risk that the curriculum would become an arena for an internal

struggle for resources, rather than a focus for efforts towards educational transformation (Hökkä 2012).

In the tightly coupled organization, the vocational teachers described their organization as dynamic and constantly changing. The teachers indicated that they had faced continuous changes regarding their work organization, curriculum and work responsibilities. Notably, in this case it seemed to be the administration of the organization that planned and organized changes, aiming to transform the management and the structure of the organization, and the content and implementation of education. In this situation, teachers did not feel strong professional agency. They saw themselves as lacking opportunities to influence significantly the changes and external instructions (Vähäsantanen 2013). For example, teachers commented critically on the most recent curriculum reform as having been planned and organized mainly at the administrative level of the organization: there had been few opportunities for teachers to give their opinions or to influence the reform. Overall, the effective implementation of changes seemed to be related to top-down strategic transformations, involving strict administrational decisions and regulations. The findings here are in line with notions that strong leadership and multiple couplings are important in promoting and sustaining changes (Priestley 2010, Burke 2011).

Although the teachers felt a sense of weak professional agency in the tightly coupled organization, they had various opinions on the developments that were unfolding. In the first place, the most recent curriculum reform, which aimed to increase the amount of students' workplace learning, generated a variety of views among the teachers; their positions varied between approving, inconsistent, and resistant (Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto 2009). Moreover, the teachers had differing opinions on the continuous organizational changes organized by the administration. Some teachers saw the changes as creating a basis for the positive development of the organization, and for increased collaboration within the organization. However, most of the teachers argued against the changes. In particular, the fact that the organization had adopted a system with a more

hierarchical and controlling form of management generated criticism (Vähäsantanen et al. 2008, Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto 2010).

In the tightly coupled organization, market-oriented thinking and accountability had also been increased, and this was seen as a negative tendency from the teachers' perspective. In such a situation, the teacher had either to adapt or to leave the organization, as one teacher indicated:

> We, the teachers, are only instruments for making money, so teachers receive very bad treatment nowadays. The organization constantly takes away what teachers need to work properly… The managers have said straight out that staff can leave if they don't feel comfortable, because people are queuing up to apply for all the jobs here. This kind of managerial mind-set is really unbelievable, all this harsh talk making it very clear that money is the most important value, that it's what is wanted and what everything is measured by.

All in all, the differing degrees of professional agency among teachers were linked to the manner in which organizational and educational changes occurred, and to how teachers perceived the nature and extent of the changes. The loosely coupled organization supported the professional agency of teachers as individuals, and this maintained the tradition of an individual teaching culture; however, it also created obstacles for organizational learning and development. In contrast, the tightly coupled organization constricted teachers' agency, but at the same time created conditions for educational and organizational transformations.

Teachers' professional development and identity negotiations

Teachers' professional development

It can be argued that continuous professional development is an integral part of teachers' work (Smith 2003, Helleve 2010). This means that professional development and learning at work are inseparable from on-going participation and from everyday work practices (Billett 2001, Hager 2004). According to Fuller and Unwin (2004), in order for learning at work to occur, the work

should give opportunities for engaging in multiple and overlapping communities, both within and beyond organizational boundaries. Thus, in the present research projects, professional development was understood through socio-cultural lenses, i.e. as involving teachers' opportunities to participate in different professional communities, and in meaning construction within and beyond their work organization (cf. Wenger 1998, Peck et al. 2009).

The loosely coupled organization offered plentiful opportunities and resources for teachers' professional development. The teachers indicated that their professional development was closely connected to their on-going work practices, and that they were free to develop their work, their working practices, and teaching as they wished (Hökkä et al. 2008). Professional development mainly took place through the planning and implementation of these everyday working practices. All the teachers indicated that having the resources to develop one's own work and professional competencies was one of the best aspects of the organization:

> It can be said that in that respect [i.e. personal professional development] the management of this department has offered exceptionally strong support… If you wanted to dig up something positive about this organization, then according to my experience the best thing is that there are no restrictions on developing your own work.

Furthermore, the teachers reported that they were able to pursue active involvement with local, national, and international networks, and to form connections with these very independently. These opportunities to form and participate in different networks were highlighted as a fundamental resource for teachers' professional development.

However, one threat to professional development and also to collective learning with colleagues was the limited or even non-existent collaboration between subject-matter groups and teachers within the organization. There were only fragile linkages and couplings between different professional groups within the loosely coupled organization (cf. Weick 2001, Swanson and Steveson 2002). The consequence was a clear discrepancy between the teachers' own professional

learning and how they perceived the development of the organization: the department was thought to offer plentiful resources for personal professional development, but as an organization, the department itself was seen as stuck in its traditional ways and almost impossible to change. One teacher described this, saying:

> No matter how stuck in its ways the department is, it still can't hinder my own professional development or stop me from developing my own work.

This discrepancy can be understood through the teachers' strong agency as individuals, which in turn was connected to the loosely coupled management style in place in the department (Hökkä 2012).

In the tightly coupled organization too, the teachers indicated that they had opportunities for professional development. However, these opportunities were described as varying in nature or extent. The teachers described their work and work organization as offering plentiful opportunities and resources to collaborate with stakeholders outside the organizational boundaries, and especially with partners in working life. This created opportunities for rich professional development, related to the teachers' particular subject-matter (Vähäsantanen et al. 2008, 2009). Collective learning with teacher colleagues was not so diversified in the organization, mainly because of continuous time pressure and a general lack of collaboration. In addition to this, many teachers indicated that the organization did not offer enough resources and opportunities to influence decisions concerning their work, and this was seen as detrimental to teachers' self-initiated development work. It was also found that not all the teachers experienced the organization as sufficiently supportive of their individual developmental needs and interests (Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto 2010). For example, some teachers saw participation in professional exhibitions related to their subject-matter as the most important opportunity for their professional development; however, the organization had increasingly limited teachers' participation in these events.

To sum up, educational organizations with different management cultures offered different possibilities and obstacles for the professional development of teachers. The loosely coupled organization created ample opportunities for teachers' professional development. By contrast, in the tightly coupled organization the teachers reported a mixed picture regarding professional development.

Teachers' professional identity negotiations

Professional identity is a multifaceted concept, with many definitions in the literature. Here, we understand the professional identity of teachers as the life history-based conception they have of themselves as professional actors. In the case of teachers, professional identity includes in particular their professional interests, their goals and values, their future prospects, their beliefs concerning students' learning, and their understanding of the goals of education (e.g. Little and Bartlett 2002, Beijaard et al. 2004). Teachers' professional orientations are also part of their professional identity, giving answers to the questions of what teachers perceive as important in their work and what tasks they regard as most meaningful (van Veen et al. 2001, van Veen and Sleegers 2006).

In studying teachers' professional identity negotiations in the loosely and the tightly coupled organization we found that teachers have a variety of orientations towards the profession: (i) an educational orientation, (ii) a subject-matter orientation, (iii) a network orientation, and (iv) a research and development orientation (Vähäsantanen et al. 2008). The educationally orientated teachers consider their most important tasks to be educating and creating a basis for students' individual development. For the subject-matter oriented teachers the subject they teach is at the centre of the work; they want to focus on teaching their subject and on helping students to acquire good professional competencies in the subject, within the educational organization. By contrast, the network-oriented teachers want to act outside the educational institutions and to work with representatives of working life and other educational organizations. The research and development-

oriented teachers think that their most meaningful duties are to be found in researching and developing their working practices.

In analysing the relations between teachers' professional identities and the organizational context (Vähäsantanen et al. 2008), we found that in the loosely coupled organization the social suggestions and administrative structures did not fundamentally obstruct teachers' orientations towards the profession; indeed, all the teachers reported that they had the opportunity to specify their core work and negotiate the contents of their work – and even, when necessary, to oppose the directions offered by central administration. This made it possible for teachers to practise their professional orientation, regardless of the nature of that orientation. Many teachers indicated that the concrete securing of their orientations lay in their ample opportunities to affect their own work-plan negotiations. One teacher described the situation in this way:

> The aspect that I can mainly affect is my own work plan, and I have been able to include in my own work plan the kind of matters that I am interested in, and that is a really important and essential issue for me.

In the loosely coupled organization, teachers' professional identities were fairly stable and unchangeable, despite the fact that teacher identities now tend to be seen as changing and dynamic (e.g. Beijaard et al. 2004). This seemed to reflect a situation in which the teachers did not face the kind of powerful educational reforms that might have forced them to adapt new educational practices and to renegotiate their professional identities. Furthermore, the dominant discourses in the organization maintained already-given professional positions and thus hindered teachers from reshaping their professional identities (Hökkä et al, 2010, 2012).

The tightly coupled organization, by contrast, created both constraints and opportunities for teachers to pursue their professional orientations, depending on the nature of the orientation. The educational and subject-matter oriented teachers argued that they were not able to practise their orientations freely, or at least not as much as before, since their orientations were in conflict with social suggestions and external directions that impacted on their work. These teachers felt incapable

of influencing this situation within the context of a strong management culture. However, the network-oriented teachers and the research and development-oriented teachers did find opportunities to carry out the duties they wanted. In the tightly coupled organization, which offered powerful suggestions for teachers' work, involving major changes, it was possible to identify both transformations and continuities in teachers' professional identities during the process of curriculum reform. The outcomes were based on teachers' active interpretations of the experiences and emotions they underwent during the reform (Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto 2011). It seems that teachers' professional identities can be expected to undergo transformations more readily, but not automatically, when educational reforms are perceived as affecting educational practices and teachers' work (see also Day 2002, van Veen and Sleegers 2009).

All in all, our observations indicate that educational organizations can provide different constraints, opportunities, and suggestions for practising professional orientations and transforming professional identities. The loosely coupled organization created conditions in which teachers were able to practise their professional orientations freely, manifesting strong professional agency, and here the teachers' professional identities mainly remained unchanged. By contrast, the tightly coupled organization created both constraints and opportunities for the teachers' professional orientations, and it also offered social suggestions for renegotiating professional identities. Some teachers transformed their professional identities to correspond with social suggestions, while other teachers maintained their identities despite changing educational practices.

Teachers' commitment to their educational organization and well-being at work

Many scholars have suggested that teachers' organizational commitment and engagement is crucial for organizational effectiveness and for the provision of quality instruction (Bakker and Demerouti 2008, Hulpia et al. 2011). Teachers' commitment to their educational organizations seems to be related to the management of the organizations, as we shall indicate below.

In the loosely coupled organization, in which the teachers' sense of professional agency was strong, and in which a balance appeared to exist between teachers' professional orientations and the social suggestions provided by the organization, all the teachers were committed to their work, and to developing it. The balance between professional orientations and social suggestions seemed to be one major reason for that commitment. The teachers were also strongly committed to their work organization, and they reported that they wished to continue working in the organization in the future:

> Of course I hope that I can continue working in this department. I am extremely heavily committed to the work here and also to developing the quality of the teaching.

In other words, the loosely coupled organization offered supportive conditions for teachers' commitment to their work and work organization.

In the tightly coupled organization many teachers actively deliberated on their future career and questioned their commitment to the organization. This occurred in particular in situations in which teachers felt that they could not practise their professional orientations, in a context of weak professional agency and changing work practices (Vähäsantanen et al. 2008). In the tightly coupled organization, the decision of one teacher to resign was in fact based on her perception that she could not express and develop her professional identity and competencies creatively in a situation of increased external management. She described the factors that were propelling her towards leaving the organization (Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto 2010):

> I found that the management culture was definitely not supporting creativity or innovation at this time. I found the current management culture to be all about control. I had the feeling that the most important task of the administration was to control what the staff were doing. I mean that there was no freedom for me, and that was a bad thing. I also felt that I was learning nothing here, and as for expertise in the areas I'm strongest in, the organization didn't need it. It's really oppressive if you feel that the organization doesn't value your competencies.

Although the teacher was no longer committed to her organization, she remained committed to the teaching profession, and subsequently moved to another educational organization which offered better resources for her professional self. In other words, it seems that teachers' decisions on their career pathways are negotiated within the resources, constraints, and prerequisites of the socio-cultural context, including its relationship to individuals' professional goals and priorities (see also Kelchtermans 2009).

Continuous changes accompanied by a lack of opportunities to practise agency or professional orientations may not merely decrease teachers' organizational commitment, but also threaten their well-being (Day 2002, Cribb and Gewirtz 2007). From the viewpoint of teachers' well-being, our studies revealed that the most problematic situation seems to be one in which teachers are forced to carry out professional duties that are in conflict with their professional interests, especially when they feel they lack the necessary professional competence and social support. This kind of situation is especially harmful if teachers cannot change the situation and the contents of their work despite their active efforts. In the words of one teacher (Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto 2011):

> 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. I told them I could no longer take on the responsibility for these groups where there were such an enormous number of problems. 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.

The extract shows how the teacher's agency was weak in negotiating the content of her work, and how the managers left the teacher alone to manage with all the problems of work and exhaustion.

Some teachers also reported feeling exhausted amid the continuous changes, even if they had a generally positive attitude towards the current reform, and had opportunities to fulfil their professional interests (Vähäsantanen and Billett 2008). The exhaustion was held to be caused mainly by having too much work and by not having enough time or social resources, or power over the work. In the situations in which well-being was experienced as under threat, the teachers might decrease the amount of work they did, or take a sabbatical.

To sum up, our research revealed some threats to teachers' commitment and well-being, in particular in the tightly coupled organization. In these kinds of situations teachers were forced to exercise agency in terms of making career-related decisions, and in particular, in terms of their commitment to the educational organization. In the loosely coupled organization the teachers were totally committed to their educational organization, due to the opportunities given to them to practise their professional agency and to act on their orientations towards the profession.

Summary of findings

The main findings are summarized in Table 1. In the loosely coupled organization the teachers' sense of professional agency was strong, because of low hierarchical separation and weak control over the teachers' work. It appeared that the teachers here were able to buffer external changes – but that this led in turn to slow transformation of the organization, and of the educational practices within it. However, the organization offered ample opportunities for teachers to develop professionally, and to practise their professional orientations. Furthermore, the teachers' commitment to the work organization was extremely strong. By contrast, in the tightly coupled organization the teachers seemed to manifest a weak sense of professional agency within a hierarchical and bureaucratic management culture. Educational reforms were under way, and the organization was undergoing continuous and rapid transformation, but many teachers faced restrictions on practising their professional orientations or on developing themselves professionally.

There also seemed to be some threats to teachers' well-being and to their commitment to the organization.

Insert table 1 about here

Discussion: agency-centred coupling in educational organizations

Our findings, deriving from different educational systems in Finland, suggest that there is a crucial set of dynamics creating tensions between the tight management of educational organizations and the professional agency of teachers. The findings imply that the trend towards new management principles and towards tighter couplings in educational organizations may have serious consequences for individual teachers. The professional agency and orientations of the teachers may be threatened, lessening their commitment to their work organization, and adversely affecting their well-being. Hence, the inflexible application of NPM as a means of achieving high-quality education is likely to run into problems. There is a danger of losing the most important resource in education – teachers who are committed to their work and to developing it – if the models of accountability and managerial leadership are adopted uncritically. However, it is also clear that in a rapidly changing and increasingly knowledge-dependent society, one fundamental question is how to manage educational organizations such as schools and universities effectively (Meyer 2002, Rowan 2002) and to create educational change (Meyer 2002, Hargreaves and Shirley 2009).

Regardless of the disadvantages of the NPM model in education, our observations suggest that there are also some clear advantages in tight management. We found that tight management practices supported organizational change and helped the organization to adopt certain new educational practices. In other educational fields, too, for example in the comprehensive school context, recent studies have supported notions of strong management and multiple couplings, in

terms of promoting change and improving students' learning outcomes (e.g. Millward and Timperley 2010). It seems that where there is strong agency among teachers and weak social linkages within educational organizations, necessary change may be hard to initiate (see also Orton and Weick 1990, Burke 2011).

Based on our findings, it appears that loosely and tightly coupled organizations have their own strengths and weaknesses, with implications at both individual and social levels. This implies a need to find new models to manage and lead educational organizations through adopting aspects taken from both loosely and tightly coupling models (see also Rowan 2002, Burke 2011). In order to achieve a balance between these models, we suggest that the management of educational organizations will best be approached through notions of agency-centred coupling. In suggesting this, we fully recognize the importance of couplings between systems, and between different levels of these systems (see also Rowan 2002, Spillane et al. 2011). However, it remains fundamental to recognize that it is always individuals with their actions and practices that are actually coupled. The focus in organizational management practices should be more on people, relationships, and learning, rather than on structures and centrally determined standards (Goldspink 2007, Brennan and Mac Ruairc 2011). This means that the priority should be given to communication, collaboration, and interaction between individuals. In order to create agency-centred coupling systems there is a need to promote (i) collaboration between actors within different levels of the organization, (ii) high-quality communication systems and communication, and (iii) shared meaning construction within and beyond organizational boundaries. In conjunction with couplings containing these elements, the promotion of teachers' agency must be considered indispensable in educational management and in transforming educational organizations. As part of such an approach, teachers should be able to influence the decisions concerning their work with regard to community and organizational issues, and to negotiate the conditions and contents of their own core work. The promotion of agency, including participation in organizational decision-making, will be important in terms of the

renegotiation of professional identity, commitment, and well-being at work. It will further support both individuals and organizations so that they can confront the new demands that are set on them.

The agency-centred coupling management advocated here is closely linked to the recent conceptualization of Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) concerning the connection between educational organizations and teachers' work. Hargreaves and Shirley emphasize teachers' agency as needing to take pride of place over bureaucratic and market-oriented thinking, and they also stress the importance of multiple networks in teachers' work. Teachers' strong agency and collaboration are seen as extremely important for students' high-quality learning (see also Sahlberg 2010, 2011). In seeking to combine our empirical findings with the perceptions of Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), we would suggest that teachers' agency and multiple social linkages are relevant from a wide variety of perspectives, including the development of educational organizations, teachers' well-being, and professional commitment – all aspects that contribute to students' learning.

In Finland, where the autonomy of teachers has traditionally been strong and the accountability culture weak, the application of the NPM model in education is a topic currently receiving much attention. The pressure to adopt models of accountability and tight management has increased over recent years as a consequence of an increasingly globalized and networked world. However, an important aspect underlying the success of Finland in international assessments has been trust – the fact that teachers are given the responsibility to plan, implement, develop, and assess their own work. One can ask what will happen to the strong commitment of teachers to their work and to its development if the new management models are adopted uncritically. At the same time, it is important to note that teachers' strong individual agency cannot be seen only as a positive matter. The creation of tighter connections and couplings between teachers, and between teachers and administrators, could enhance organizational and collective learning and development.

In relation to agency-centred coupling management practices, our findings have practical implications. First of all, at the individual level, teachers' professional agency must be supported. For example, a variety of educational tools and interventions, including identity workshops, could

help teachers to become aware of themselves and their relation to the changing social environment, and also help them to strengthen their possibilities to affect their working environment (Hänninen and Eteläpelto 2008, Mahlakaarto 2010). Secondly, at the collective level, organizations and local communities within and beyond organizational boundaries should be supported through the promotion of social linkages, involving collaboration and boundary-crossing between different working groups. This could be initiated, for example, through community and organizational level interventions whose aim would be to enhance the communal consciousness of official and unofficial power-relations and of cultural practices within educational organizations (Kalliola and Nakari 2007). All in all, we would argue that in order to enhance the management of educational organizations it will be necessary to support practices at both the individual and the collective level; and further, that this can best be implemented when management promotes agency-centred coupling.

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