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KATJA VÄHÄSANTANEN & STEPHEN BILLET

**NEGOTIATING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY:
VOCATIONAL TEACHERS' PERSONAL STRATEGIES
IN A REFORM CONTEXT**

ABSTRACT

Recent studies of learning through work have included how professional identities are formed through participation in work. However, we need a more elaborated understanding of how professional identities are negotiated at times of rapid change in working practices. This chapter examines the personal strategies that vocational teachers adopt, and the professional identity negotiations that occur, in response to requirements to change professional practices. We report on a study in which open-ended narrative interviews were conducted with sixteen Finnish vocational teachers. From the teachers' accounts, we identified distinct personal strategies that were adopted to engage with change. The strategies were labelled as follows: (i) professional development, (ii) passive accommodation, (iii) active participation, (iv) a balancing act, and (v) withdrawal. The strategies were aligned to the teachers' individual concerns, and were bound up with the personal resources available in negotiating with the changing character of the work. An account of these strategies offers a new way of understanding how identities are negotiated through an active, personally-shaped process. The study also illuminates how to promote individuals' management of the self and of learning at work.

INTRODUCTION

“The job of a vocational teacher – the change is apparently here to stay. It's such hard work all the time that there's really no time when you can just move ahead steadily. You have to be ready for changes in curriculum development, and many other things, practical things too...” (Vocational teacher 2)

Like other workers, vocational teachers nowadays are increasingly challenged to respond to changes in their work – changes often initiated by external agencies and administrations (Buck, 2005). In educational institutions, this can include transformations to educational goals and organisational norms, all of which impact on the teacher's work. Educational reforms affect approaches to student learning and course contents, imposing on teachers' new tasks and responsibilities. The changes in teachers' work practices can also represent increasingly challenges to the established norms associated with teachers' professional beliefs and competencies. All of this requires continuous professional identity negotiations and

learning at work if individuals are to engage with changing work practices (Buck, 2005; Kirpal, 2004a; Scheeres & Solomon, 2006).

Recent studies have addressed professional identity as something that is negotiated at work, and that involves the interdependence of the individual and the social context (e.g. Billett & Somerville, 2004; Kirpal, 2004a). However, we need more elaborated understandings of how professional identity is negotiated and how individuals' active agency is exercised in the context of a changing workplace. As a consequence, this chapter describes some of the personal strategies that Finnish vocational teachers were used when negotiating their professional identity in an extensive reform context. In the vocational institution that was the location for this research, the teachers had recently confronted various educational reforms, imposed by both national and local levels of administration. The most recent curriculum reform meant that initial vocational education and training (VET) was now conducted much less in the vocational schools, and more in the workplaces (see appendix). This reform comprised more than involve changes in the vocational teachers' classroom practice. Instead, it also vastly increased the amount of work the teachers had to do outside their own institution, including extensive liaison, collaboration and personal interaction with workplaces. The reform was planned and organised mainly on a top-down basis, with teachers being requested and required to put it into practice. This situation provides a context for the vocational teachers' professional identity negotiations, essential if we are to understand how their activities, learning at work, and commitment evolve in a situation of upheaval within the system. It is evident that teachers' professional identities and their commitment will be crucial factors in the adoption of innovative practices (Day, Elliot, & Kington, 2005; van Veen, Slegers, Bergen, & Klaassen, 2001). Maintaining commitment to professional practice in times of change is central to the success of reform processes (Day, 2000), and loss of that commitment can have serious implications for professional practice.

In this chapter, the conceptual premises through which the teachers' personal strategies are identified and advanced. Our investigation is located within a subject-centred socio-cultural framework, where professional identity negotiations are understood as being closely intertwined with learning and participation within workplace practices (Billett & Somerville, 2004; Fenwick, 2006). Having outlined the procedures of the study, we describe some of the personal strategies that vocational teachers used to negotiate their participation in the reform context. This illustrates how the teachers' active agency is exercised within the changing requirements of the workplace. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the possible personal and social consequences of educational changes, with some practical implications for the ways in which individuals could be helped to cope in the reform context and to maintain their learning at work.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY NEGOTIATIONS, LEARNING AND AGENCY

Learning is more than acquiring knowledge, developing professional competency or updating skills. It is also the construction of identities associated with the

societal and cultural practices in which individuals engage (Wenger, 1998). Thus, in professional work such as teaching, individuals' professional development includes the maintenance of their identity as an effective professional (Hargreaves, 1995). Professional identity is a premise for individuals' perceptions of themselves as professional actors. For teachers, this includes the values and professional orientations held concerning their own teaching and the learning of their students; it further includes identification with and commitment to the teaching profession, and to the work organisation in question (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Day et al., 2005; Little & Bartlett, 2002). Learning through and at work includes the formation and transformation of workers' subjectivities and identities (Fenwick, 2006; Høystrup, 2006). Learning also comprises the dual process of individual change along with the remaking of cultural and contextual practices (Billett & Somerville, 2004), including (as in the present instance) how reformed practices should be enacted.

Increasingly, it seems that, the management of work organisations are demanding that individuals should have particular skills and knowledge, limiting the types of identities required and the ways of engaging with work (FAME Consortium, 2007; Høystrup, 2006). Nevertheless, despite the various organisational demands, individuals are not wholly subject to these institutional pressures. The construction of identities is not simply a matter of taking on identities and roles which are pre-existent or pre-structured in the environment (Kirpal, 2004a). Nor is professional identity purely a matter of being responsive to the influence of the conceptions and expectations posed by other people and social contexts (Beijaard et al., 2004). Instead, individuals construct what they experience on the basis of what they know, and this includes their professional values and beliefs (Billett, 2006). In a reform context, individuals will engage with changes in ways that can range from acceptance through to dismissal and outright rejection, as shaped by their personal interests, conceptions and construals. There will probably be diverse forms of engagement. These could include partial compliance or apparent acceptance of change in public spheres, with rejection of change in the privacy of the classroom.

The construction of professional identity, therefore, can be seen as an ongoing process in which individuals are active agents. Moreover, agency is likely to be based on one's personal interests and motivations – and also the capability to make vocational and occupational choices concerning one's core work, and to act intentionally on these choices (Beijaard et al., 2004; Eteläpelto & Saarinen, 2006; Fenwick, 2006). Agency is necessarily exercised within and through the social practices of the workplace (Billett & Smith, 2006), so it is likely to shape individual teacher's approaches to reshaping their professional practice during a process of reform. This means that identity negotiations comprise individuals who actively interpret and reflect the complex relationship between the personal and the social context (Archer 2003, Fenwick & Somerville, 2006; Høystrup, 2006). This includes taking into consideration their own individual experiences, professional orientations and values, in conjunction with external conditions and situational expectations regarding their own subjectivity and work (Beijaard et al., 2004;

Fenwick, 2006). Archer (2000) also emphasises reflexivity and agency in identity construction; an individual's personal identity will emerge via that person's emotional commentaries on one's various concerns.

In the study reported here, we assume that both personal and contextual factors shape professional identity negotiations, and influence how teachers perceive themselves as professionals. This means that neither social suggestion nor the individual's agency alone is sufficient to secure professional identity construction and learning at work (Billett & Smith, 2006; FAME Consortium, 2007).

INDIVIDUALS' STRATEGIES IN PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY NEGOTIATIONS

Recent studies in other fields of work have shown that in workplace negotiations between the personal and the social context, individuals deploy different strategies to cope with continuous change and the social suggestions thrust at them (Fenwick & Somerville, 2006; Kirpal, 2004a). They may be selective in their readings of a particular suggestion, and possibly ignore it, or rebuff it (Billett, 2007). Thus, the approach may range from rejection to complete engagement, leading to very different types of identities (FAME Consortium, 2007). The individuals' capacity to exercise their agency at work has been shown to be strongly associated with how they value that work, and how they identify with it as permitting them to exercise a sense of self (Billett, 2007).

Analogously, Casey (1995) proposes that workers should learn to be themselves, in so far as their sense of self can be accommodated within organisational values and ideologies. She found that "corporate colonisation of the self" forces workers to adopt *defensive*, *colluded* or *capitulated* strategies or self-styles, which can arise in an individual's different career stages and situations. The defensive self is characterised by displays of many different forms of small-scale resistance and retreat, and it expresses confusion, fear and ambivalence, with criticism of the work organisation. The colluded self, for its part, is characterised by compliance, dependency and over-acceptance of the organisation's ideologies. This self will deny conflict through complicity with the corporate culture. Some colluded corporate selves will manifest a compulsive optimism in their beliefs about the company and their future with it. The third option, capitulation, contains elements of both defensiveness and collusion, but both are restrained by a degree of strategic, instrumental pragmatism. The workers regulate their relationship with the company: they know when to identify with the company and when to retreat. In such a case, they may be able to negotiate a settlement that provides sufficient psychic stability, so long as they are confident that they can leave the organisation whenever they wish to (Casey, 1995).

Kirpal, Brown and Dif (2007) reported that employees adjust to changing work and skill demands in a variety of ways: classical forms of identification with work (including both resistant and open-minded responses to changes), long-term adjustment, short-term adjustment, flexible identification, and redefinition (see also Brown, 2004; Kirpal, 2004b). Similarly, Collin, et al. (2007) noted how employees

combated constraints on learning through adopting strategies referred to as attachment and bypass strategies. The attachment strategies comprised: (i) developing a stronger “we-ness” in the immediate local community, and (ii) maintaining a high level of work performance, when the means of fighting back are found in co-operation with others practising in the work community. The two bypass strategies comprised: (i) strengthening the meaning of other areas of life, and (ii) giving up, in which case the constraints on learning can be compensated by things outside the actual workplace, or by the social interaction which takes place within it. The fight-back strategies mentioned above included the practice of active agency and the construction of individual subjectivity in relation to work.

It follows that rapid changes in work practices may lead to teachers and other workers to adopt particular strategies, in situations where people experience stress, exhaustion, dissatisfaction, and negative manifestations of commitment, motivation or identification with their work. According to van Veen, Slegers and van de Ven (2005), educational reform can impact on a teacher’s professional and personal identity in terms of: (i) personal concerns related to motivation, with weakened self-esteem, and reduced opportunities for learning, (ii) moral concerns related to teaching perceptions, involving how students learn and what they have to learn, and (iii) social concerns related to relationships with students, the position within the school, and relationships with colleagues and the school management. However, changes can open also up new opportunities for individuals, including the exercise of a sense of self (Billett & Pavlova, 2005).

INVESTIGATING NEGOTIATIONS OF VOCATIONAL TEACHERS’ PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

Aims of the study

The studies referred to above indicate that workers adopt different strategies for managing changes and responding to social demands. However, there is a lack of detailed understanding of how vocational teachers negotiate their professional identity in a reform context, in particular when the reform requires significant transformations to the work. The study reported here aimed to elaborate further the means by which vocational teachers negotiate their professional identity in this context, and to identify some of the personal strategies that the teachers adopted in engaging with the reform.

Participants and procedures

The data illustrating vocational teachers’ professional identity negotiations were gathered via interviews with sixteen vocational teachers (i.e. ten males and six females, aged 31 - 57 years, with teaching experience ranging from 4 to 30 years). The participants taught in various study programmes, covering various fields of initial VET, all within the same institution. Participation was voluntary. The

teachers interviewed had recently faced various educational reforms, imposed at both national and local level, which had redefined or were in the process of redefining the work of the vocational teachers. In the institution referred to in this chapter, the recent curriculum reform was introduced in the spring of 2006 (see appendix), immediately prior to the interviews. At the time of the interviews, teachers had been informed about the reform and they had commenced tasks related to its implementation. The teachers participating in this project were at the forefront of the implementation of the reform. They were interviewed individually within their own vocational institution, and participated in the interviews during school hours.

Open-ended narrative interviews were used to capture data on: (i) the vocational teachers' professional development and career, (ii) the sense of their professional identity and the nature of their work, (iii) the continuous educational reforms and the current curriculum reform, (iv) the work community and organisation, and (v) the teachers' hopes and expectations for the future. The teachers were encouraged to discuss freely their conceptions and experiences associated with these topics. Consequently, the interviews were truly unique to each person, even though the same issues tended to be raised across all the interviews. The interviews varied in length from over an hour to over two hours.

Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the collection and analysis being undertaken by the first author. Qualitative analysis was used, comprising the identification of themes and a categorisation of the data against those themes. The first step was to read the protocol several times in order to obtain an overall sense of the interview data, with a particular focus on identifying the various kinds of strategies teachers adopted in order to adapt to the changing work practices. We were interested in teachers' concerns in the reform context, including also their accounts of professional values and commitments, and their orientations to their work, their learning and the ongoing changes. From the similarities and differences in the teachers' accounts, five distinct personal strategies were identified as being adopted. These strategies were delineated through empirical data (i.e. the interview transcripts), rather than being premised on theoretical assumptions. However, terminology aligned with the study's theoretical orientation was used to describe the findings. Previously, it had been shown that these teachers' age, teaching experience and gender did not greatly affect their orientations towards the current curriculum reform (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2008). It should also be emphasised that the teachers' personal strategies are constructions, i.e. the strategies do not relate to individual teachers' accounts on a strict one-to-one basis. Nevertheless, it was found that each teacher tended, broadly speaking, to identify with a particular strategy.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the vocational teachers' interview data indicated their adoption of five distinct personal strategies in engaging with the recent curriculum reform. These were categorised as involving primarily: (i) professional development, (ii)

passive accommodation, (iii) active participation, (iv) a balancing act, and (v) withdrawal. These strategies were shaped by the teachers' individual concerns about their performance, their wellbeing, the impacts of the reform on the students, the practice of their professional identity, and their workload. By focusing on personal strategies and concerns it is possible to describe individuals' professional identity negotiations and a more detailed understanding of the teachers' professional values and commitments, and of their orientations to work, learning and demands for change. The strategies are considered individually below.

(i) The professional development strategy

Vocational teachers with the professional development strategy held mainly positive, but also negative, attitudes to the current reform. They reported that they enjoyed their work. Overall, they were motivated to work as teachers and committed to teaching. They saw no reasons for leaving the profession or educational institution. On the contrary, they wanted to remain in the same profession and organisation for their entire teaching career.

They were also motivated to carry out the tasks mandated by the reform. However, the required tasks and roles were seen as professionally challenging, and they were concerned about their performance as teachers. The teachers reported that they lacked the competency, capabilities and knowledge to carry out the prescribed tasks. They reported needing more knowledge for training the students for workplace learning periods, better skills for supporting and guiding students during their workplace learning periods, and more developed capabilities that they could deploy in the event that students had problems in the workplaces, or needed special support. They claimed that they themselves required external support and professional training. Overall, they wanted to use professional development as a tool to fulfil their teaching role better. They had an optimistic attitude to the future: everything would work out, and they would do their tasks when they had received the right training and support. Further training thus played a key role in terms of coping with the social expectations that arise in teaching.

(ii) Passive accommodation

For some vocational teachers, the term that best defined their sentiments was one of passive accommodation to the recent reform. They reported having had to deal with continuous and extensive changes in vocational education – more than they could reasonably cope with. However, they wanted to avoid criticism and direct conflicts with their educational institution; they believed that resisting the changes would be exhausting and fruitless because of the organisation's management culture. In this situation, they were willing simply to accept the current reform and to adjust to the new expectations. This acceptance was irrespective of whether the goals of the reform were held to be either contrary to or consonant with the teachers' own values, or whether they perceived the new demands made on teachers as positive or negative.

This strategy of accommodation was closely connected to the teachers' attempts to develop a less involved approach to their work. For these teachers, work had been a meaningful part of life. However, they now reported a willingness to focus more on other areas of life. The significance of work had diminished for them; hence they sought a greater separation between their professional and personal lives, in order to protect their own wellbeing and reduce the threat of burn-out.

“...Sometimes I've given too much of my time to my work... But now I'm trying to keep some kind of balance between work and family, and to think about what's behind working too many hours, when I know that in the long run I can't – and [in fact] I couldn't do it before. But maybe it's a question of values changing or somehow seeing the bigger picture... so I have to have something else too, so that my work and the rest of my life can be in balance.” (Vocational teacher 2)

In terms of their work, the intended strategies included reducing their working hours. They had no wish to overstrain themselves: they just wanted to do their job without excessive effort or investment. In addition, they wanted to take a more passive role, and be in the periphery of the work organisation. They reported no longer feeling it necessary to be aware of all the issues and events arising within the organisation. In the reform context, they were not really motivated to develop their competencies, since that was experienced as fairly exhausting and time-consuming, even if they felt that their professional competencies were not at the highest level. These teachers seemed to be hoping that they could retire before the next round of reforms. However, they were committed to the organisation, mainly on the grounds that they did have not enough courage or professional competencies to work in other professions.

(iii) Active participation

Vocational teachers who expressed the active participation strategy had both negative and positive comments about the educational changes and the recent reform. However, their criticism was not restricted to their professional practice. They wanted to participate actively in the implementation of the current reform and to make it successful. Yet, they were also concerned that, as a consequence of the reform, the students would be quite alone without adequate support in the workplaces and that their professional competencies would thus become narrower. They wanted to support the students, and to train the workplace trainers so that the latter, too, would support students better. In so doing, they sought to uphold their professional values concerning what was best for the students.

These teachers did not passively accept the approaches and role-related ways of action determined by the organisation. Some teachers claimed that these ways of action were not workable, and that they conflicted with good professional practice. They had already developed their own methods for organising the students' workplace learning and for informing the representatives of working life

about the coming reform. Hence, they did not necessarily act in the way the organisation expected them to, seeking instead to create better approaches in collaboration with their colleagues. They did not believe that the new roles and expanded activities would be easy to implement, yet they thought that successful experiences could be provided to the students, so long as teachers were active; the teachers would have to e.g. seek out information, and look for ways to co-operate with workplace representatives. They, too, wanted to focus more on their family and free time in the future; however, they were committed to their work, and to working actively as teachers – either because they saw their work as meaningful or because they did not wish to see themselves as the kind of people who would change their job whenever problems came up.

(iv) A balancing act

The “balancing act” refers to the strategy reported by those vocational teachers who were both advocating the educational changes and identifying means to cope with the changes, however exhausting these would be. They were willing to change their work practices, and also to develop effective vocational education and study programmes. They had a generally positive sentiment toward the current reform and how the reform would hopefully influence teaching practices, tasks and roles. They thought the changes were genuinely adding fresh interest to their work. They wanted to take an active role in the development processes, including both the planning and the implementation stages. For them, the continuous learning at work was an important issue, despite their belief that they already had good competencies for working as teachers.

Even if these teachers enjoyed their work with its continuous development, and even if they had opportunities to fulfil their professional self, they reported feeling tired and exhausted amid the continuous changes. The exhaustion was held to be caused especially by having too much work and by not having enough time or resources, or the power to make decisions. During the interviews, they mentioned many schemes and alternative ideas which might prevent exhaustion and give motivation to work in the future. These included the desires: (i) to work part-time, on a self-employed basis, or (ii) to take a sabbatical period. The sabbatical would provide the opportunity to travel, to rest and to take care of their mental and physical wellbeing, or alternatively study at a university. In other words, they were committed to teaching, but they needed to have a break. Moreover, even if they saw the continuous development as positive, some of them also wished for stability. Without this, they were not sure if they could commit themselves to the work, due to concerns about their own personal resources and wellbeing:

“It would be really nice if these changes would come to an end for a while; that we could have some kind of stable period without the constant curriculum development... I wish some kind of rationality would come in place of the uncertainty, confusion and everything... Now when I’ve been tired in the spring, a couple of times I’ve felt like saying ‘I just can’t carry on,

why am I working in a way that gets me totally exhausted'... This change has been going on for a long time, I wish that there would be some kind of period of calm... if nothing changes then I do have other workplaces I could go to.”
(Vocational teacher 6)

In this way, these teachers' personal strategy was to manage their work in ways which could sustain them through the rigours of the job, and the demands for continuous changes to their professional practices and expectations.

(v) *Withdrawal*

Vocational teachers who had a withdrawal strategy strongly criticised their work organisation and the recent reform they were expected to carry out. Continuous development was not seen as necessary, since they believed that the existing practices were workable. They were willing to continue as teachers for the present, but they were also planning to leave the current organisation or even the profession. They were confident that they could leave whenever they wished to.

There were two forms of withdrawal. The first was represented by a teacher whose sense of professional identity was in conflict with the social demands of the reform. He wanted to work as an educator within the school (not the workplace) context. This meant not focussing so much on working outside the vocational institutions, or to carry out much organising, guiding and evaluating of students' workplace learning. In addition, he reported lacking the competencies for carrying out these kinds of duties. Moreover, he did not really want to learn these kinds of skills, believing that they were not related to the teacher's core competency. He indicated being unable to remain working as a teacher in the institution if he could not practise a sense of professional identity there. So, although committed to the teaching profession, he was considering leaving the educational organisation and moving elsewhere:

“...So far I haven't really seriously thought about changing my profession, though I have considered changing the workplace. Let's say that in the last few years the thought has surfaced, and indeed I have been asked if I'd like to work for another place. I've been mulling the matter over, but, you know, the work would be the same, I would still teach the same subject, so yeah...”
(Vocational teacher 7)

This participant illustrates how conflicts between individuals' professional identities and the demands of the social world can result in non-engagement with the organisation, in ways similar to those described by Hodges (1998).

The second form of withdrawal occurred when teachers worried about their performance as teachers. They reported that, in the future, they might face many problems without receiving satisfactory support – given that the organisation and its leaders had not supported them so far. In addition, the impending reform would challenge some of their professional skills. They did not know how they could motivate the representatives of working life to undertake the expanded duties, since the students were required to do more learning in the workplaces.

Furthermore, they were afraid that the working hours of the teachers were going to be reduced. All this led them to talk about leaving the profession and the organisation. The teacher's work was seen as just one profession amid others, and in future they would not necessarily work as teachers. Their short-term commitment to their current profession was influenced by the awareness that they had enough skills and knowledge to move into other professions.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that vocational teachers negotiated their professional identities individually and actively through the adoption of particular personal strategies in the reform context. These strategies, and their selection and adoption by the interviewees, were shaped by concerns about personal wellbeing, the practice of professional identity, performance, workload, and the impacts of the reform on the students (cf. Archer, 2000; van Veen et al., 2005).

To summarise these findings: (i) Teachers with the *professional development* strategy had mainly positive attitudes to the current reform, but were worried about their performance as teachers, reporting that their professional competencies were inadequate. They viewed professional development and training as a means to secure all the competence needed to fulfil the required duties of vocational teachers. (ii) Teachers with the *passive accommodation* strategy were worried about their wellbeing. They mainly wanted to adjust to all the social demands in the reform context – despite their own opinions concerning the continuous changes and the current reform – and to take a less involved approach to their work, in order to promote own wellbeing. (iii) Teachers with the *active participation* strategy were worried about how the current reform would impact on the students. In spite of their own – also negative – attitudes to the reform they wanted to participate in the implementation of the reform, in order to support students in a new situation. Thus, they were willing to do the duties demanded of them, but they wanted to transform and refine the approaches that had been laid down. (iv) Teachers with the *balancing act* strategy had a positive attitude to the continuous development, and they could even be described as agents of change. However, they reported that the teachers' work, and working amid continuous changes was exhausting. They wanted either to work as part-time teachers or else to have a sabbatical in order to promote own wellbeing and motivation. (v) Teachers with the *withdrawal strategy* criticised the continuous development and were losing their commitments; the current reform was seen as a threat to the practice of professional identity, or teachers worried about their performance as teachers in the absence of adequate support, and were also concerned that their working hours might be decreased. Although the findings here are quite consistent with those of other studies on individuals' strategies in identity negotiations (e.g. Casey, 1995; Kirpal et al., 2007), the strategies and professional identities should be understood as situationally negotiated in a specific context and at a particular moment in the subjects' careers (Beijaard et al., 2004; Billett & Somerville, 2004). In other words, the strategies identified are likely to be dynamic and unstable.

In conceptual terms, this study emphasises that the adoption of different personal strategies can be seen as illustrating individual means of negotiating professional identity, involving different ways of practising active agency in a reform context. The point is that personal agency can mediate the relationship between the individual and the social in diverse and distinct ways. Overall, even if the current reform was planned and organised mainly from above, the subjects had identified ways to exercise agency and to make occupational decisions through the exercise of personal strategies. The teachers' personal interests, values, resources and capacities had a particular influence on their decision-making. They exercised personal strategies in deciding whether or not they wished to commit themselves to the profession and work organisation. The findings indicate that the individuals' commitment to the profession and organisation differed. Some teachers were strongly committed to both the profession and the organisation. Others were losing their sense of commitment under the impact of continuous change, because there were fewer opportunities to practise professional identity, or because they had concerns about their well-being, and about possible reductions in their working hours. Hence, in such a reform context, teachers' commitment cannot be taken for granted (e.g. Day et al., 2005). Teachers also exercised their agency in deciding their orientations to their work. The range of personal strategies illustrates the fact that some teachers were motivated to work and learn, and to perform actively. However, amid all the continuous demands, some teachers saw their work as burdensome and wearisome. Hence, they wanted to engage less fully or have a sabbatical. Taking a broader perspective, subjects and their agency are intertwined with the social context (Billett, 2007; Fenwick & Somerville, 2006). The teachers in our study could exercise agency within the reform context by making occupational and personal choices in the adoption of particular strategies – although one could also say that they were forced to make these kinds of choices and decisions, given the demands and concerns they faced.

It follows that in reform processes and in professional development practices, greater consideration needs to be given to the needs, aspirations and professional sentiments of individuals. At a general level, teachers should be given the encouragement and opportunity to practise their professional identity and to achieve professional development, in accordance with their individual needs. One point of particular importance emerges here, however. The educational institution should create an environment in which the leaders support the teachers in their work and take account of their wellbeing. Workplace learning is not the only key factor for managing a reform; it is also important to address people's professional identity and wellbeing. Failing this, those concerned may well lose commitment and motivation. One teacher considered this issue as follows:

“...Finnish teachers put their whole heart into their work, put themselves into it like madmen. Nobody understands how much work we've done; we don't count up the hours we work, in fact we've given our lives to the teaching profession... that kind of flexibility [that is now required] of teachers, all that tightening of the screws till a person's energy and willingness completely dries up... people are going to leave the organisations and then new, younger

people will come in. Will the profession continue to function, and where will all that tacit knowledge go, all that existing knowledge? Yet the students' actual results are extremely good in our institution..." (Vocational teacher 10)

The careful management of changes in teachers' practices has consequences for individual teachers, for the educational system they serve and for the students they teach. The continuous demand for change can lead to the loss of experienced teachers and their professional knowledge, which is hardly a positive tendency for vocational education and training, or for the quality of the teaching taking place within it. Our findings suggest that the future educational organisations should invest more in supporting teachers in dealing with changing work practices, in order to minimise the negative personal and social consequences of changes. Of course, this request has been made many times before, and seems to go unheeded.

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APPENDIX

The development of initial vocational education and training

The Finnish system of initial vocational education and training (VET) has traditionally been school-based rather than workplace based. However, recent reforms at national and local level have aimed at greater integration between schools and workplaces, progressively increasing the amount of students' workplace learning. Since the transformation of initial VET in 2001, vocational institutions have provided three-year study programmes in all fields leading to vocational qualifications. The qualifications include at least 20 credits (out of 120 credits) for workplace learning. In the institution used in the study, the most recent curriculum reform was introduced in the spring of 2006. The reform was planned and organised mainly by upper levels of administration. As a consequence of the reform implemented by the institution, vocational qualifications now include 40–60 credits of students' workplace learning (i.e. more than the national minimum). At the time of the interviews, revised qualifications had been planned for particular study programmes; these were due to be implemented the following semester, alongside existing qualifications. The reform has mandated particular duties for teachers, including an increasing amount of work related to organising, guiding and evaluating students' workplace learning periods, informing workplace personnel about the goals of the reform, co-operating with workplaces, and giving instruction to workplace trainers (i.e. workers who will guide students within the workplace itself) (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2008).

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