



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



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers' professional agency amid educational change is elaborated.
- Agency is multiform and temporal, and has social and individual resources.
- An agency-centered approach sheds light on educational change and teacher identity.
- Tools for supporting change and teachers' identity negotiation are presented.
- A relationship between agency and identity is conceptualized.

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 2 December 2013

Received in revised form

30 October 2014

Accepted 28 November 2014

Available online

### Keywords:

Educational change

Professional agency

Professional identity

Socio-cultural theory

Teacher

Vocational education and training

## ABSTRACT

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

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## 1. Introduction

Educational change is a fact of teachers' professional lives. All educational organizations need to innovate and to develop their practices to keep pace with social and technological change, and to respond to economic pressures. In this situation, teachers need to adopt new professional roles, cultivate their professional identities, and incorporate new insights into their professional practices (Day & Kington, 2008; Hoekstra, Brekelmans, Beijaard, & Korthagen, 2009). However, transformations in educational practices (Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2014; Sugrue, 2008) and in teachers' identities (Korthagen, 2004; Lasky, 2005) do not occur easily: in fact, they are

slow, and hard to achieve. To encompass the complexity of transformation processes a sophisticated longitudinal examination is needed (Sugrue, 2008). This paper examines teachers' professional agency in the course of a specific educational reform that changed vocational teachers' work to involve more professional tasks outside the school. In so doing it seeks to shed light on teachers' professional identity negotiations and educational change, and to contribute to recent discussion on developing educational programs (e.g. Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Peck, Gallucci, Sloan, & Lippincott, 2009).

Professional agency has recently become a focus of international research in the fields of teaching and teacher education (e.g. Billett, 2014; Kayi-Aydar, 2015; Lasky, 2005; März & Kelchtermans, 2013; Priestley, Edwards, & Priestley, 2012). Generally speaking, professional agency refers to the notion that professionals such as teachers have the power to act, to affect matters, to make decisions and choices, and take stances, for example, in relation to their work

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and professional identities (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013; Ketelaar, Beijaard, Boshuizen, & den Brok, 2012; Lasky, 2005; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Taking this theoretical conceptualization as a starting point, the present paper looks at teachers' professional agency in the stream of educational change within Finnish initial vocational education and training. More precisely, the influence of teachers, and their choices and actions, are examined in relation to three complementary components of agency, including (i) their own work, (ii) their involvement with an educational reform, and (iii) the negotiation of their professional identity.

In Finland, vocational education has traditionally been school-based, meaning that vocational competencies have been taught mainly to students within vocational institutions. Similarly in a number of other countries (e.g. France, Sweden, and the United States), vocational education and the world of work have been viewed as somewhat disconnected (Barabasch & Rauner, 2012; Fejes & Köpsén, 2014). However, in Finland as elsewhere, recent reforms have aimed to break down the separation between schools and workplaces, and to develop vocational studies at the upper secondary level to include more learning outside the school. Thus, over a three-year period of study (120 credits), it is envisaged that the learning outside the school should be worth at least 20 credits (six months). The main responsibility for providing vocational studies lies with the vocational institutions. Compared to other countries there are differences. For example, for Swedish students, the minimum duration of the workplace practicum is 15 weeks during three years, whereas in German-speaking countries, vocational studies are mostly completed in the context of an apprenticeship. During the apprenticeship, students spend a significant amount of time within working life. This kind of program is based on the liaison of companies, who function as training providers and as responsible bodies, and education and training institutes. As the trend in many countries has been to reduce school-based teaching, teachers are required to cross boundaries between school and working life. This involves them in multiple tasks notably related to students' workplace learning. Given their interaction across organizational and professional boundaries, today's vocational teachers can be described as border-crossers (cf. Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Wenger, 1998).

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

In this study, three components of professional agency were integrated, addressing professional agency also as a continuing phenomenon. The latter was possible due to the fact that the primary studies were conducted at the different stages of an educational reform. The reform was introduced in a single vocational institution, and it was designed by managers on a top-down basis. As a consequence of this local reform, the workplace learning load of students increased tremendously, from the national minimum to

40–60 credits, and teachers had to undertake more professional duties outside the school in close collaboration with workplaces. The primary studies were based on interviews with vocational teachers, and they applied different qualitative analytical methods, including narrative analysis, thematic analysis, and content analysis.

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

## 2. Professional agency amid change

To gain a comprehensive picture of professional agency, teachers' professional agency amid educational change is here considered from three perspectives. First of all, professional agency can be understood as the teacher's opportunities to influence his or her own work (Ketelaar et al., 2012; Priestley et al., 2012; Pyhältö, Pietarinen, & Soini, 2012). This includes negotiating the contents and conditions of one's work (including reform practices), and making decisions on one's ways of working. In terms of influencing the contents, design, and organization of educational change, teachers may be active participants, treated as persons whose actions and opinions matter. However, although the idea of teachers as developmental agents has long been central to educational thinking, a common theme nowadays is that in many countries (such as Australia and the Netherlands) reforms are designed and imposed on a top-down basis (see Billett, 2014; Luttenberg, van Veen, & Imants, 2013; Pyhältö et al., 2012). In the absence of opportunities for active participation and influence, the agency of teachers is reduced. One can ask what such "subordinated" agency might mean, for example, in terms of teachers' commitment to educational changes and to organizations. There is also a need to explore whether a top-down management style, which leaves little space for teachers' agency, may actually be effective in transforming the educational landscape – since there is some evidence that educational change can be difficult to accomplish when teachers have abundant agency (Hökkä & Eteläpelto, 2014; Orton & Weick, 1990).

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

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