Collaboration as the central factor determining vocational teachers´ professionality

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Summary

Vocational teachers have faced radical changes in their work since Estonia regained its independence. While previously, teachers specialised in teaching theory or practical training, now vocational teachers need to teach both and also integrate vocational with general subjects. Moreover, in addition to teaching, other time-consuming tasks, such as administrative tasks, course instructions, preparing students for skills competitions and others, has become part of the role of vocational teachers. Therefore, experienced teachers tend to feel that teaching now has secondary importance in their professional work (Sirk et al., 2016). The variety among students ranging from those without general education to those with higher education has been regarded as the biggest challenge by vocational teachers. Little support from the students' homes and serious learning and behavioural problems among vocational students at the upper-secondary level after basic school (Liivik & Sirk, 2015; Sirk et al., 2016) increasingly demands social-pedagogical and psychological competencies from teachers (Cort, 2011; Harris et al., 2005; Kirpal, 2011). Changes related to students have brought new work roles for vocational teachers, such as supervisor, mentor, councillor or social worker (Cort & Rolls, 2010; Hughes & Attwell, 2010; Kats et al., 2010; Sirk et al., 2016; Susimetsä, 2010; Tutschner, 2010; Ümarik & Rekkor, 2013) and influenced their professionality (Sirk et al., 2016) and professional identity (Ümarik & Rekkor, 2013).

We can argue that teachers now need to teach in a way for which they have not been prepared (Hargreaves, 2006). Moreover, constant changes demand continuous professional development. Collaborative learning – exchange of the best practices and learning materials has become wide-spread (Sirk et al., 2016). Collaborative learning and co-operation in work practices has been regarded as the most effective way to adapt to the changes (Hargreaves, 2006). Previous studies have demonstrated that those teachers who are professionally highly

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networked tend to adopt educational changes resulting from various reform policies more easily, and hold more positive attitudes towards the changes than less networked teachers, as they understand the aims of the new requirements (Rekkor et al., 2013; Tafel-Viia et al., 2012; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2009; Ümarik & Rekkor, 2013). Changes in vocational teachers' work and work roles indicate the need to reconceptualise vocational teacher professionalism.

Hargreaves (2006) in his model distinguishes four ages of professionalism and argues that we have stepped from the period of teacher autonomy to the period of collegiality. This view is in line with Hoyle (1974), who regards professionality as one attribute of professionalism related to individual elements of teaching work, such as the skills, competences and procedures applied in practice. In his model of restricted and extended professionality, the restricted professional rather applies an intuitive approach and experience than theory in his/her work and tends to hold a narrow classroom-centred perspective in his/her work. The extended professional, on the other hand, has a broader view about the role of education in society, values theoretical knowledge, and conceptualises his/her work and role in shaping student lives. Moreover, the extended professional is involved in collaborative learning and decision-making, the development of curricula, and the selection of methods and materials. According to Hoyle (1974), collaboration inevitably decreases teacher autonomy. However, other authors (Evetts, 2002; Pearson & Moomaw, 2006) offer an alternative approach to autonomy that is not based on individual but collective decision-making. Results of our previous studies (Rekkor et al., 2013; Tafel-Viia et al., 2012) tend to support the arguments made by Hargreaves (2006) that in the age of collegial professional, there are also teachers who tend to ignore collaboration and prefer to work in isolation. Therefore, our paper's aim is to understand VET teachers' professionality in the age of collegiality. The main research question explores what groups can be identified among Estonian vocational teachers based on Hoyle's model of restricted and extended professionality, and how do different groups differ in terms of work satisfaction and perceptions regarding the status of vocational education in society.

We base our analysis on data from a quantitative survey conducted among 501 vocational teachers in Estonia. By K-means clustering, three groups of teachers were formed: 1) extensively networked professionals (27%), involving also networking outside their own school; 2) collaboration-detached professionals (28%) and 3) school-centred professionals (45%).

Subsequently, the clusters formed have been described according to their socio-demographic background. Moreover, differences between groups have been analysed in terms of work satisfaction and perceptions of the status of vocational teachers. The statistically significant differences between the groups

have been controlled using analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Bonferroni and Chi-square tests.

Based on our results we can argue that changes in vocational education have involved differentiation among vocational teachers based on collaboration practices. First, extensively networked professionals (27%) were involved in intensive co-operation in their school, but also in learning collaboration outside the school. The study revealed that although this group of teachers is highly involved in collaborative work and learning practices they still perceive autonomy in their work, are satisfied with their work and the vocational teacher profession. This group involves more Estonian than Russian speakers and more teachers of vocational subjects than general ones. Secondly, collaboration-detached professionals (28%) were characterised by low involvement in co-operation practices and detachment from wider professional networks although perceiving themselves as self-efficient in shaping student lives through their work. Among the collaboration-detached group, there are more Russian speaking teachers, teachers of general education and male teachers. The majority of vocational teachers fell into the school-centred professionals group (45%), whose co-operation practices are mainly limited to their own school context, and are less involved in wider co-operation networks. In respect to the co-operation spectrum, all groups of teachers perceive autonomy in their work. However, extensively networked professionals are more satisfied with their work and more committed to their profession than other groups. On the other hand, the status of vocational teachers as perceived does not differ statistically significantly between different groups of vocational teachers.

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