

How professional memory influences vocational teachers' perception of changes related to students

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Summary

Global changes and reform policies have affected the work and professionalism of vocational teachers. The qualification requirements for vocational teachers have risen and their work roles have widened. The teacher has been regarded as being responsible for the quality of graduates entering into the workplace (Sirk et al., 2016). Among various changes in vocational teachers' work, student related changes have been perceived as the most challenging ones shaping their everyday working lives (Sirk et al., 2016; van Middelkoop et al., 2017). Students' learning difficulties and behavioural problems, lack of motivation and support from the families have broadened the work roles of vocational teachers and added new roles, such as social worker, mentor and councillor (Cort & Rolls, 2010; Hughes & Attwell, 2010; Kats et al., 2010; Sirk et al., 2016; Susimetsä, 2010). All this poses new challenges to vocational teachers' psychological and social pedagogical competences (Kirpal, 2011).

Vocational teachers have perceived all these changes in their work differently and hold more or less positive attitudes regarding them. Previous studies have shown that the adoption of changes is related to teachers' personal characteristics, and also their professional approach (Rekkor et al., 2013; Tafel-Viia et al., 2012; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011; Ümarik & Rekkor, 2013). However, previous studies do not explain how the perception of the change in the student population is related to the professional experience of vocational teachers.

Hargreaves (2005) has emphasised the importance of how the length of career, experience and age is related to the development of the professional memory (PM). PM builds on memories of emotional experiences or feelings (Ben-Peretz, 2002) and reflects on nostalgia that affects the adaptation to new changes, especially among experienced teachers near to their retirement age (Goodson et al., 2006). PM is also related to teachers' memories of their previous professional practices (Tarpey, 2015) that are associated with emotions and are always socially constructed (Ben-Peretz, 2002; Goodson et al., 2006;

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Tarpey, 2015, 2016). Teacher's professional memories incorporate collective professional practices, beliefs and professional development. Therefore, memories cannot be isolated, but contextual, belonging to a certain cultural context and period of time (Tarpey, 2009, 2015). The aim of this study is to explain how vocational teachers experience changes within the student population through the concept of PM.

The sequential mixed methods approach has been applied as a methodological design in the study (Creswell, 2010). First, we analysed the quantitative data. We grouped vocational teachers based on the perceptions of the changes in student population by using k-means clustering. The teacher groups formed were compared to PM characteristics (length of pedagogical experiences and age), other demographic characteristics and school context factors. In the next stage, we analysed the qualitative semi-structured interviews of nine vocational teachers, representing different vocational fields, who had 20 years or more teaching experience. The qualitative thematic analysis enabled us to discover what causes vocational teachers have attributed to the changes in the student population.

The quantitative analysis resulted in three different groups of teachers based on their perceptions on student related changes: positive, various and negative. Comparison of groups with PM characteristics (age and length of pedagogical experience) revealed that vocational teachers with lesser pedagogical experiences and younger teachers tend to have more positive experiences related to changes of student population than others. This matches with Hargreaves' (2005) idea that teachers' career phases are related to the development of PM and readiness to adapt to change. In addition, the size of the school and the nature of student groups taught were related to teachers' experiences. Therefore, vocational teachers that perceived students related changes most negatively tended to work in larger schools and teach younger students (those entering VET school after 9th grade). This result confirms that the main problems relate to teaching adolescents. In professional memories of vocational teachers more positive emotions related to the teaching of adult learners emerged that provides work satisfaction but also poses challenges for their professional knowledge and competence.

Results from the qualitative analysis show that experienced vocational teachers had a negative attitude towards student related changes. Nostalgic memories contributed to them comparing today's students with those they taught at the beginning of their career. The changing work roles, professional activities and loss of power of vocational teachers are related to these changes. The problem of today's students having lower motivation and lower basic competence, as compared to those in the past, was emphasised, which suggests a new professional approach and methods are required from vocational

teachers. It is significant that the low motivation of students also affects the motivation of the vocational teachers. The “good old students” understanding co-constructed by vocational teachers reflects vocational teachers' PM and shapes their work identity and present work roles (Ben-Peretz, 2002; Goodson et al., 2006; Tarpey, 2015, 2016).

The transitional societal context after regaining the independence and joining the EU were highlighted by vocational teachers as a critical period that brought about numerous problems, such as psychological problems, laziness and inactivity. Vocational teachers are faced with a dilemma to accept or refuse the new role as that of social worker and replace the care and support lacking from the families. Moreover, teachers are concerned that at present neither parents nor schools are responsible for developing students' work ethics. Today's society requires us to increase student rights, whilst decreasing teachers' power and authority in the classroom.

Several aspects, such as shifts in the socially acceptable norms, transitional context, educational policies and school context, tend to affect student population and also shape vocational teachers' PM. Teachers who are at an early stage in their career hold more positive attitudes toward the student population, because they do not have nostalgic memories of “old time students” that could affect their experiences. Experienced vocational teachers have both negative and positive experiences related to students. So, the question emerges why vocational teachers encounter more negative experiences? According to PM conception we may conclude that negative changes are challenges for teachers that are hard to cope with. Thus, on one side PM hinders coping with changes because changes are compared with memories. On the other hand, PM enables to reflect changes in teachers' work and education (Ben-Peretz, 2002; Tarpey, 2009). Thus, it is important that we understand the impact of nostalgic memories on vocational teachers professional memory because these might prevent them coping with changes. Accordingly, more attention should be paid to support the professional development of long-serving vocational teachers to notice positive aspects in the student population and educational changes in general.

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