

## RESEARCHING VOCATIONAL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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Received: 23 May 2023  
Accepted: 9 October 2023

*The specifics of vocational teachers' careers and their transition from industry to the education system, as well as the demands of continued professional development after they become teachers, can create tensions in their professional identity. The purpose of this paper is to examine the influences on vocational teachers' professional identity from macro, meso, and micro perspectives to provide a holistic view of the complexity of their professional identity. The literature review has shown that at the macro level it is necessary to explore how educational policies make their way into vocational schools and to vocational teachers as well as how status of vocational education and training in a country can influence vocational teachers. At the meso level it is important to study the relationships vocational teachers form with different stakeholders, as well as institutional support in terms of continuous professional development. At the micro level it is valuable to gain insight into vocational teachers' personal biographies by exploring their social background, prior educational and professional experiences, and reasons for choosing the teaching profession.*

**Keywords:** vocational teachers; professional identity from the macro, meso and micro perspective; vocational education and training

### Introduction

Theorising and researching identity in general are a difficult endeavour because identity is a complex concept that cannot be uniformly

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and unambiguously defined, in part because it has been explored from a variety of disciplinary perspectives that have provided us with numerous conceptual meanings as well as roles attributed to it. The most prominent scholarly discussions of identity refer to its dichotomy in terms of focusing on the person and their self-reflection (personal identity theory) or the influence of social interactions and context on its formation (social identity theory) (Zembylas, 2003; Cinoğlu and Arıkan, 2012).

Moreover, the question arises whether identity is a stable entity or incoherent and subject to change over time, and whether it consists of multiple identity domains. Not surprisingly, professional identity is also difficult to grasp, as evidenced in part by the variety of definitions offered. Professional identity has been seen as an interaction between structural changes and changes in attitudes that lead to occupational determination (Brott and Myers, 1999). It has been said to involve perceptions of self-image and self-efficacy in relation to the work environment and can be perceived through the lens of values, location, and roles (Briggs, 2007). Some definitions of professional identity emphasize individual or social aspects (Caza and Creary, 2016; Wenger, 1998), while some authors emphasize the importance of the individual, interactional, and situational domains of professional identity (Williams, 2013; Cruess et al. 2015; Sze Goh, 2015; Bukor, 2015). The issue of agency has also been discussed, taking into account that individuals are able to make informed decisions regarding their professional lives and change their own professional identity and practice just as their professional environment can change their professional identity and practice (Billet and Somerville, 2004; Vähäsantanen, Saarinen, and Etäläpelto, 2019; Vloet and van Swet, 2010; Biesta, Priestley and Robinson, 2015). Finally, taking into account the fact that people's career paths have changed significantly, with a person sometimes changing multiple career paths over the course of their lifetime and occupations themselves becoming more complex and hybrid, it is possible to conclude that a person may have multiple interrelated occupational identities (Brooks, 2016; Caza and Creary, 2016).

Vocational teachers differ from other teachers in the education system in several aspects. First, we can identify different profiles of vocational teachers in different countries (e.g., vocational teachers, instructors, trainers), who may be employed full-time, part-time, or on an

hourly basis (Grollmann, 2008). Second, vocational teachers typically exhibit dual professionalisation: they are experts in their own field and often subsequently enter the teaching profession and become teachers (Andersson and Köpsén, 2015). They usually have prior professional experience in their first profession and then later acquire teaching competencies through various teacher education programmes, although their initial training varies across countries (Williams, 2013; Andersson and Köpsén, 2015; Green, 2015). Finally, they are expected to continuously connect the worlds of work and education (Berner, 2010; Farnsworth and Higham, 2012; Fejes and Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén, 2014; Green, 2015; Alvunger, 2016). These characteristics of vocational teachers often influence their teaching practices and professional identity. For example, Grollmann (2008) points out that the different profiles of vocational teachers and the different models of their employment, as well as an unsystematic approach to their education and training, lead to a low status of vocational teachers in the education system and to a fragmentation of the profession, which in turn may affect their professional identity. Moreover, their dual professionalization and the constant need to be a link between the two worlds requires them to maintain and develop their teaching and expert competencies in parallel, which requires both personal and institutional agency and the support and coherence of educational policies. This also means that their professional identity is usually inherently hybrid, which means that various external and internal influences can cause instability in this hybridity. In this respect, research on the professional identity of vocational teachers has been fruitful (Viskovic and Robson, 2001; Colley, James, Diment, and Tedder, 2003; Dalton and Smith, 2004; Berner, 2010; Vähäsantanen, Saarinen, and Eteläpelto, 2010; Farnsworth and Higham, 2012; Williams, 2013; Fejes and Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén, 2014; Määttä, Koski-Heikkinen and Uusiautti, 2014; Andersson and Köpsén, 2015; Sirk, Liivik, and Loogma, 2016; Andersson, Hellgren and Köpsén, 2018), but due to the complexity of the topic, the studies mostly addressed the exploration of specific aspects of vocational teachers' professional identity or provided different classifications of their professional identity according to specific criteria. The aforementioned tension in the professional identity of vocational teachers - vocational teacher as occupational expert and vocational teacher as teacher (especially in vocational teachers with prior

work experience who have entered the teaching profession subsequently) - is the main focus of this paper and in order to discuss this tension, the influences on the professional identity of vocational school teachers at the macro, meso, and micro levels that may affect the formation of vocational school teachers' professional identity are examined. In this way, the paper aims to present an overview of the complexity of vocational teachers' professional identity and discusses the importance of researching vocational teachers' professional identity in a holistic manner.

## **Methodology**

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of this paper is to gain insight into the influences on professional identity of vocational teachers at the macro, meso, and micro levels. However, the literature review conducted began with the broader research question: what can influence the professional identity formation process of teachers in general and vocational teachers in particular? To answer this question, the initial focus of the literature review was on the conceptual analysis of the terms professional identity and teacher professional identity. The works of authors such as: Kelchtermans (1993); Beijaard (1995); Wenger (1998); Meijers (1998); Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004); Hall (2004), Sachs (2005); Savickas (2005); Søreide, (2006); Rodgers and Scott (2008); Burke and Stets (2009); Urbanski (2011); Caza and Creary, (2016) were analysed, concluding that professional identity and, accordingly, teachers' professional identities are a result of both personal agency and the context in which an individual finds himself or herself, and are under the influence of teachers' personal biographies, personal intended and prompted actions (micro level), and the influences of their situational (meso level) and broader contextual professional environment (macro level). In accordance with the latter, the matrix of macro-, meso-, and micro-level influences was created and used as a starting point for the literature review on the topic of the characteristics of professional identity of vocational teachers and the influences on their professional identity. The authors whose works were analysed for this purpose are the focus of this paper, and the rest of the text explains the results of this part of the literature review.

## **Vocational teachers' professional identity from a macro perspective**

The neoliberal discourse of applying private sector rules to the public sector and the pursuit of economic viability, accountability, responsibility, standardisation, and competitiveness is a topic of discussion at all levels of education in the various educational systems around the world. Therefore, the debate over structure and agency in educational research has intensified because of the increasing pressures placed on teachers by policymakers. As Sachs (2001) puts it, teachers are being asked to be autonomous and at the same time are under great pressure from policymakers and society. Another issue on which there is not yet consensus is the question of the profession and professionalism in general, and the teaching profession in particular has seen serious debates about its professionalism (Evetts, 2009, 2011; Sachs, 2001; 2003; 2015; Nairz-Wirth and Feldman, 2019). This has then led to discussions about the types of teacher professionalism, with Evetts (2009; 2011) speaking of professional and organisational professionalism and Sachs (2001) speaking of democratic and managerial professionalism, leading to different types of teacher identity (entrepreneurial versus activist identity).

It could be argued that the structure vs. agency debate and the macro influences on vocational teachers are even more complex due to the intense focus of education policy on more integrated collaboration between the education system and the industry. Vocational teachers sometimes receive highly contradictory messages from their social environment, which inevitably affects their professional identity. This contradiction is caused, on the one hand, by the educational policy expectations towards vocational teachers and schools and, on the other hand, by the realistic conditions and opportunities for the development of vocational education and training (in further text VET). Education policy emphasizes the need to modernize vocational education, which places new demands on vocational teachers in relation to the required knowledge and skills (Andersson and Köpsén, 2015). Teachers in general, and vocational teachers in particular, have also seen a change in their roles due to the continuous diversification in society. VET is presented as the foundation for strengthening the economy and achieving national prosperity, raising the question of the skills required of voca-

tional teachers (Black and Yasukawa, 2013). Although not always explicitly, education policies often prioritize one of the roles of vocational teachers, expecting teachers to either actively connect to the world of work or develop teaching competencies, thus creating tensions in their professional identity (Viskovic and Robson, 2001). Given the increasing focus of education policy on work-based learning, which advocates more integrated collaboration between vocational schools and the industry, and thus the collaboration of vocational teachers with employers, it can be concluded that priority is given to the occupational identity of vocational teachers. A similar priority of educational policy is noted by Schmidt (2019), who concludes in her research that a strong focus of educational policy on linking vocational teachers to industry has led to a neglect of vocational teachers' pedagogical competencies, which, according to the research participants' own words, has affected not only the quality of their teaching but also their professional identity. Köpsén (2014) takes a similar line in her study, noting that vocational teachers need to develop competencies for advising, motivating, and empowering students for growth and development. This is not uncommon given the research conducted by Sirk, Liivik, and Loogma (2016), which indicates that there is an increasing number of students with special needs, social, and behavioural problems in the vocational education system, with vocational teachers noticing a lack of motivation and work habits in their students. In this context, the focus is also on the development of the teachers' professional identity. Therefore, the most important macro influence on the professional identity of vocational teachers seems to be the implementation of educational reforms, which are a response of educational policies to the various social changes mentioned above. Educational reforms mostly occur through a "top-down" mechanism. Considering that the process of forming and developing a professional identity is neither a mere acceptance of existing social identities nor is it built exclusively on personal foundations, but is a continuous negotiation between these two aspects (Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto, 2011), it can be assumed that educational policies and, in particular, educational reforms will influence the professional identity of vocational teachers. Hautz (2022) asserts that problems arise when educational policy attempts to address these problems in vocational education through the neoliberal discourse of accountability, standardi-

sation, and quality assurance. In his research on Austrian vocational teachers, he concluded that continuous improvement has become a common discourse and that teachers in general are not so much forced as encouraged to view a certain behaviour as desirable in order to become good teachers. He noted that there is little resistance among vocational teachers as long as they do not feel that their professional autonomy is being restricted. He concludes, however, that even the idea of teacher autonomy and freedom of choice has become a tool used to persuade teachers to pursue political goals which can then make us question whether Sachs's activist teacher identity is even possible. However, research by Vähäsantanen and Etelaepelto (2011) and Goodson and Umarik, (2019) indicates that reforms that are implemented from the top down without involving vocational teachers in their development and implementation can lead to greater resistance or frustration among them, which is consistent with Sachs (2001; 2015) and her notion of inclusion, collaboration, and the control teachers must have over the standards they are given. In this context, it is interesting to note the research findings of Vähäsantanen et al. (2008), which point to constraining or facilitating circumstances for the implementation of educational reforms that depend on the structure of the institutions in which teachers work, but also on what priorities vocational teachers set in their work. The study concerned institutions and teachers involved in significant reforms both in terms of organization and curricular changes, i.e., teaching content. The authors note two basic types of institutions, the stronger social suggestion organization and the weaker social suggestion organization. Stronger social suggestion organizations are those institutions that responded to the changes in such a way that teachers were given very specific tasks in the implementation of the reform and had to organize the process of learning and teaching in the workplace and in the school. They were also given more administrative responsibilities. Teachers describe such institutions as hierarchical and bureaucratic, and during the changes they did not feel able to do anything themselves, but felt helpless because the reform was planned and implemented by others. At the same time, they believe that they were expected to be very flexible and to take on new roles without any difficulties. They also felt that the reasons and methods of the changes were not well communicated by the school administration and that teachers

were not asked their opinions about the changes at all. There was also a lack of discussion among colleagues, and the whole situation led to strong dissatisfaction among teachers. On the other hand, the weaker social suggestion organizations approached the changes differently. Teachers had the opportunity to voice their opinions and oppose the changes made, and they had good communication with each other and with the school administration during the implementation of the changes. Teachers were involved in school-level working groups where they could participate in decision making related to the changes, and at a personal level there was a sense of autonomy related to planning their own teaching practices. What is more, Vähäsantanen et al. (2008) also distinguish four types of teachers' professional orientation: an educational orientation, a subject matter orientation, a network orientation, and a research and development orientation. Education-oriented teachers focus on students, their individual development, and the development of their professional identity; students' well-being is important to them, they care about them and help them with their problems, and the goal is to teach students life values and skills. Subject-oriented teachers focus on the importance of the profession and the development of professional knowledge and relevant skills, it is important to them to develop their professional identity in students, and they feel obliged to make students understand the real situation in the labour market. Network-oriented teachers focus on their activities outside the educational institution, they work well with employers, they want to cooperate with other educational institutions, and they want to be involved more often in guiding students during their professional practice. Finally, the research and development-oriented teachers focus on contributing to the development of the educational system, they often participate in development projects at school, and they want to promote their profession outside the institution. Considering these types of teacher orientation the authors showed that in stronger social suggestion organizations education- and subject-oriented teachers feel that they are forced to change their priorities, which threatens their professional identity. They believe that they do not have enough time to spend with students and teaching, but instead have to deal with administration. Network and research and development-oriented teachers can more easily maintain their priorities in a stronger social suggestion organization, but indicate that they



would be happy to have the opportunity to be more involved in school change. In weaker social suggestion organizations, all teachers indicate that they still manage to maintain their priorities, although they also admit that the amount of administrative work required of them is increasingly challenging.

The aforementioned research results support the thesis that the conflict between structure and agency is very real among vocational teachers and can lead to instability in vocational teachers' professional identity. This is best seen when educational policies and reforms make their way into the educational system. The types and manner of the changes being communicated to vocational teachers can affect how they see their profession as well as their individual role in the changes occurring at national levels. Educational reforms tend to have a top-bottom approach which then leaves vocational teachers in a situation where their personal biographies, especially prior work experience, personal values and beliefs about what it means to be a vocational teacher can significantly affect the way they deal with the mentioned reforms and changes. Specifically, it seems that the bigger the gap between the ideas and values that are promoted by the reforms and those held by the vocational teachers, the more tensions this creates in the vocational teachers' professional identity.

In addition to the discussed structure vs. agency debate in terms of prioritising occupational or teacher identity as well as in terms of the neoliberal discourse in educational policy it is important to note that a potentially negative macro influence on the professional identity of vocational teachers is the fact that vocational schools in some countries suffer from low social status, which consequently leads to low status of vocational teachers (Grollmann, 2008; Mrnjauš and Fabac, 2014; Hamilton Broad, 2016; Sirk, Liivik, and Loogma, 2016; Boldrini, Sappa, and Aprea, 2019; Vignjević Korotaj, 2020). This is especially true for some trade vocational programs, which, as Berner (2010) asserts, have a low status in the educational hierarchy of high schools and a significant proportion of students with lower grades, often low self-esteem, difficulty concentrating, etc.

Policy makers as well as VET institutions need to be made aware of all these influences, as the described type of tension in professional identity can lead (vocational) teachers to consider leaving the educa-

tion system (Khapova, et al., 2007; Vignjević Korotaj 2020). In this sense, changes in the manner policy makers create and communicate educational reforms seem to be essential as well as the institutional support from the school leadership in terms of giving vocational teachers a sense of autonomy and control over proposed educational policies and creating space for negotiation between teachers, policy makers and employers. Although there is less research on the macro influence of status and prestige of VET programmes on the professional identity of VET teachers, the call for synergy among policy makers, employers, and VET schools is also palpable, with certain VET schools themselves seeming to be able to encourage teachers to make extra efforts (participation in various projects, contacts with the community and employers) to improve their prestige and status. This brings the discussion on vocational teachers' professional identity to the institutional or meso level.

### **Vocational teachers' professional identity from a meso perspective**

The literature review has shown that the situational (institutional) context plays an important role in the development of vocational teachers' professional identity. This context includes relationships with students and colleagues but also school policies, school management as well as school support especially in terms of vocational teachers' professional development. Relationship with students seems to be particularly important for vocational teachers' professional identity (Berner, 2010; Farnsworth and Higham, 2012; Tran and Nguyen, 2013; Köpsén, 2014; Määttä, Koski-Heikkinen and Uusiautti, 2014; Green, 2015). Vocational teachers commonly organise their classes to simulate the work environment in the classroom, but what is more, they seem to form close very relationships with their students. As Köpsén (2014: 201) claims, vocational teachers see themselves as more common and therefore closer to their students which is why they form closer bonds with them than the other, "authoritarian teachers".

Green (2015) also confirms these research results claiming that vocational teachers commonly form close relationships with their students whereby they are even familiar with their family situation. In that sense, vocational teachers along with working on their students' professional

skills focus also on general competencies such as respecting deadlines, taking initiative, arriving to work on time etc.

Additionally, there is a growing number of students, especially in vocational schools who are unmotivated, disinterested or have different special needs (Sirk, Liivik and Loogma, 2016) which is why vocational teachers often take over a parenting role of care and worry in order to keep their students in schools. Vignjević Korotaj (2020) found in her research that a good relationship with students can be central to teachers' retention, even if other relationships of vocational teachers within the institution are not as good or there are other problems related to working conditions that vocational teachers are not satisfied with. In addition to the relationship with students, the relationship that vocational teachers establish with other colleagues also plays an important role in their professional identity when considering the institutional context. Good collegial support is especially important early in their careers when vocational teachers are trying to define the boundaries of their relationship with students and the limits of their responsibilities as teachers (Anspal, Eisenschmidt and Löfström, 2012). Collegial and especially mentorship support is also essential when entering the teaching profession (Viskovic and Robson, 2001; Berner, 2010; Vähäsantanen, Saarinen and Eteläpelto, 2010; Chan, 2012; Fejes and Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén, 2014; Green, 2015), whereby structured professional socialisation often contributes to efficient formation of professional identity. In that sense, institutions have a duty to ensure that vocational teachers have the opportunity to observe classes and learn and work with a collaborative and experienced mentor at the beginning of their teaching career (Sze Goh, 2013). Otherwise, teachers base their professional practice on their previous educational experiences or their increasing agency, which may prove to be exhausting and demotivating. Green (2015) adds that if vocational teachers do not build good relationships with their colleagues and mentors, they tend to become isolated from their community and develop a closer relationship with their students than with their colleagues.

Relationships with colleagues and mentors were also found to be important in maintaining professional identity for vocational teachers, as they provide needed support and professional buy-in at the beginning of their teaching careers, as well as opportunities for ongoing exchange

with colleagues on issues related to teaching, as well as their professional knowledge (Viskovic and Robson, 2001; Berner, 2010; Vähäsantanen, Saarinen, and Eteläpelto, 2019; Chan, 2012; Fejes and Köpsén, 2014; Köpsén, 2014; Green, 2015). In addition to the socialization and mentoring processes at the beginning of vocational teachers' work, the importance of good collegial relationships is also highlighted in the context of the changes to which vocational teachers have had to adapt recently (e.g., expansion of professional roles, increasing number of students with special needs, more administrative tasks, etc.) (Sirk, Livik, and Loogma, 2016). According to the authors, good collaboration and communication with colleagues makes it easier for vocational teachers to cope with the above challenges, but also enables them to share teaching materials, exchange experiences, and disseminate information from the trainings they attend. In creating quality interpersonal relationships in school, it is important to note the role of school leadership, which should promote mutual cooperation and communication between teachers and school leadership, as well as between teachers. If good relationships and a positive atmosphere can be achieved in the school, teachers will cooperate spontaneously more often (Nissilä et al., 2015), and the sense of belonging to the organization will prove stronger if there is good cooperation with colleagues and their positive feedback, which indirectly affects the stability of vocational teachers' overall professional identity (Vähäsantanen et al., 2008). The aforementioned studies clearly point to the sometimes crucial role of institutional support, peers, and mentors in structured professional socialization and consequently professional identity formation. However, institutional influences on the formation and development of vocational teachers' professional identity go beyond, and this is best demonstrated in the institutional role of providing opportunities for professional development and growth for vocational teachers, especially given the educational policy expectations for vocational teachers to be experts in both teaching and their field. Since vocational teachers should continuously maintain contacts within their field and update their competencies in this respect, but also develop themselves in parallel within the framework of teacher competencies, institutional support is extremely important in addition to their own commitment in this sense. Adequate school equipment is often crucial to the quality of the work of vocation-

al schools, but institutional support for the continuous development of subject teachers to work on said equipment should also not be ignored (Sirk, Liivik, and Loogma, 2016). The importance of the role of the institution in relation to professional development of vocational teachers is also evident when teachers have lower intrinsic motivation for professional development in their field, which seems to be more often the case for vocational teachers who have little or no professional experience, especially in providing opportunities for longer-term professional development (Andersson, Hellgren, and Köpsén, 2018). Similarly, the role of the school is critical in formally connecting with employers at the institutional level and providing opportunities for vocational teachers to work in their field to stay current. Vocational teachers in Finland, for example, have this opportunity, and the experiences of these teachers, according to Virkkula and Nissilä (2014) research, point to several benefits for teachers (e.g. Development of required competencies, strengthening of dialog between teachers and employers, development of new ideas to improve the quality of teaching, better understanding of the challenges students face in vocational practice) and for schools (e.g., creation of institutional networks, monitoring of the quality of education and realization of learning outcomes, opportunity for employers to contribute to the creation of vocational curriculum). On the other hand, institutional support is also important in providing opportunities for the acquisition and development of teacher competencies, where vocational teachers are not only encouraged to engage in training outside of school, but such training can also be organized in school (Sirk, Liivik, and Loogma, 2016). It can be concluded that meso influences on the professional identity of vocational teachers are strong. The institution plays an important role in transmitting the macro-influences to the individual vocational teacher and in shaping the meso-influences within the institution. Institutional policies can influence the organisation of professional socialisation of novice vocational teachers, teacher collaboration and relationships with students, collaboration with industry, as well as continuous professional development of vocational teachers. However, it has already been mentioned that previous work and educational experiences, personal values, and beliefs about what it means to be a vocational teacher can be an important lens through which macro and meso influences on professional identity are interpreted. Thus, the

question of what constitutes micro-influences on vocational teachers' professional identity and the occupational vs. teacher identity debate still remains to be discussed.

### **Vocational teachers' professional identity from a micro perspective**

Personal biographies appear to play an important role in vocational teachers' professional identity formation and development especially in terms of their social background, prior educational and professional experiences, reasons for choosing a career as a teacher, their experiences with teacher training programmes, and their personal values and beliefs about what it means to be a vocational teacher (Bekale Nze and Ginestié, 2012; Berger and D'Ascoli, 2012; Black and Yasukava, 2013; Sze Goh, 2013; Williams, 2013; Fejes and Köpsén, 2014; Gustafson, 2016; Umarik and Goodson, 2020).

Even though biographical narrative research is quite common in studying teachers' professional identity (Clandinin, 2013), there aren't many studies that deal with the manner in which social background of vocational teachers influences their professional identity. However, Cohen-Scali (2003) claims that the formation of professional identity begins in childhood under the influence of family and institutional attitudes (e.g., at school) toward work. Thus, the way parents and teachers in primary and secondary schools relate to work can influence occupational self-perception. It can also be concluded that the problems encountered at this stage of primary socialization may have a strong impact on the stability of the later professional identity. Previous educational experiences may also be important at the beginning of vocational teachers' teaching careers because if vocational teachers do not receive adequate support and mentoring at the beginning of their careers, they will rely mainly on their own educational experiences and try to teach as they were taught during their education (Sze Goh, 2013). In addition, prior educational experiences also shape their disciplinary identity. Specifically, these experiences enable them to acquire professional knowledge and practice, learn with role models, gain authentic practical experience, and develop a sense of compatibility between personal and professional identity (Chin Pei Tan, Van der Molen, and Schmidt, 2015). Therefore,

we can conclude that prior educational experiences influence vocational teachers' perception of the teaching profession as well as their occupational identity. Prior work experience seems to be particularly important to vocational teachers for a variety of reasons. First, it seems to give them credibility in the classroom and enable them to reconstruct the work environment in their classrooms (Berner, 2010), and second, it helps them make and maintain connections between the world of work and school (Fejes and Köpsén, 2014). Moreover, on a more personal level, the quality and quantity of these experiences can be an incentive to change their career path and choose teaching as a profession (Farnsworth and Higham, 2012; Ūmarik and Goodson, 2020), and they can also influence the way vocational teachers identify themselves. Namely, some studies (Farnsworth and Higham, 2012; Köpsén, 2014; Andersson and Köpsén, 2018) have shown that the more prior work experience vocational teachers have, the more likely they are to identify as experts in their field rather than as teachers, and conversely, the less prior work experience they have, the more likely they are to identify as teachers. On the other hand, Vignjević Korotaj (2020) has shown that teachers with more extensive previous work experience are more likely to identify themselves as teachers because they feel that they have closed a chapter of work in the industry and are now focused on passing on their knowledge and experience to young future experts in their field. In any case, all mentioned studies showed that vocational teachers with more prior work experience appear to be more involved in creating links between school and industry and are more likely to continually cross that boundary. Previous professional experiences may also influence vocational teachers' decision to enter teaching, but other reasons stemming from their personal biography also seem to influence this decision and, consequently, their professional identity. Berger and D'Ascoli (2012) find that dissatisfaction with their previous employment is an important reason for vocational teachers to enter the teaching profession. The dissatisfaction mostly relates to poor working conditions, high levels of stress, and a lack of time for family life. On the other hand, more intrinsic reasons for entering teaching were also found, related to a sense of a more significant social contribution of the teaching profession or to positive experiences in mentoring younger colleagues. Whether vocational teachers realize the reasons for leaving their previous job can be critical to their

satisfaction and retention in the teaching profession. It should be noted that Berger and D'Ascoli (2012) assert that external motivational factors often have a negative influence on retention in the teaching profession, while internal factors have a positive influence. Thus, if vocational teachers decide to change careers for reasons of financial security or because they had the opportunity to do the job, and are not intrinsically motivated, this is more likely to have a negative impact on their continuation in teaching and long-term retention in the profession. In addition, teachers who cite multiple reasons for entering the teaching profession are more likely to stay in the profession because a decline in one type of motivation is compensated for by another type of motivation. Those teachers who had low intrinsic motivation at the time of transition and have increasingly poor perceptions of themselves as teachers, poor prior educational experiences, and do not feel the social benefits of the teaching profession are more likely to experience crises or even leave the teaching profession. Whether the reasons for transition are intrinsic or motivated by the idea of job security, this has implications for the further development of professional identity as well as for understanding the reasons why people choose to transition into the education system. The experiences vocational teachers have in teacher education programmes also seem to have a major impact on vocational teachers' professional identity since these programmes are sometimes the first contact they have with the teaching profession. Farnsworth and Higham (2012) and Williams (2013) showed that vocational teachers are more likely to identify themselves as teachers if they have positive experiences during the programme and if they find the content useful once they enter teaching practise. On the other hand, Köpsén (2014) emphasised that negative perceptions of the programmes are usually fostered by vocational teachers' existing biases about the teaching profession as well as the lack of vocational pedagogy content in the programmes. In addition, Sarastuen (2019) found that vocational teachers often experience feelings of loss and even sadness in the process of early transition, even when they voluntarily choose to change careers. These feelings occur primarily because they had an intense connection to their field of work, but also out of fear of possibly losing the skills needed to work in their field. It is also important to note that by changing careers, they may feel that they no longer belong to their community of practise, which may lead them to



feel that they have to let go of a part of themselves. Therefore, the author emphasises the importance of teacher education programmes to help address these feelings in the process of vocational teachers' career transition. Finally, personal biographies are also shaped by personal values and beliefs that vocational teachers have about their profession. Notably, personal values and beliefs play more than a reflexive role, as a discrepancy between personal values and professional values may lead one to either withdraw from practice or attempt to change practice to align with one's values and beliefs (Billet and Somerville, 2004). It is also important to note that values conflict may be more evident in vocational teachers due to their previous work experience in organizations that are significantly different from their new school environment (Farnsworth and Higham, 2012). In addition to the above, it should be noted that in the study by Määttä, Koski-Heikkinen, and Uusiautti (2014) vocational teachers emphasize the importance of personal values, moral and ethical dimensions, and personal beliefs in the context of direct work with students, as they believe that they should teach their students life skills, values, attitudes toward themselves, work, and other people. Personal beliefs and values of vocational teachers about what it means to be a teacher and what is expected of students in their future profession can therefore be crucial in shaping perceptions of the institutional context, as well as educational policy and the broader social context.

## **Conclusion**

Finally, what can we say about the influences on professional identity of vocational teachers at the macro, meso, and micro levels and researching vocational teachers' identity in this way? First, we can conclude that there is a subtle interplay and continuous negotiation of meaning between these levels in relation to the professional identity of vocational teachers, so it is necessary to explore the nuances of this interplay in order to gain a holistic view of the complexity of their professional identity. In considering the tension between vocational teachers' occupational and teacher identity, we can conclude that at the macro-level we need to examine how priorities set by educational policy make their way into vocational schools and to vocational teachers, and whether vocational teachers feel they have input, control, and autonomy

in decision making regarding the implementation of educational policy. In addition, the influence of the status and reputation of vocational education in a country on vocational teachers should be considered. At the meso level, various relationships vocational teachers form with different stakeholders, as well as institutional support in terms of continuous professional development, both in their field and in terms of their teaching skills, need to be explored. At the micro level, it is important to gain insight into vocational teachers' personal biographies by exploring their social background, prior educational and professional experiences, and reasons for choosing the teaching profession, as all of these can serve as interpretations for the perceptions vocational teachers have about what it means to be a vocational teacher. Therefore, this literature review calls for a holistic approach to conducting future empirical research on vocational teachers' professional identity because by examining all of the influences on vocational teachers' professional identity on different levels, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of vocational teachers' professional identity. Additionally, researching vocational teachers' professional identity holistically without the need to classify it according to specific criteria, also allows for recommendations for possible interventions that can be made on different levels to have well-adjusted, motivated, efficient, and satisfied vocational teachers in the system who are then able and willing to teach future experts in their field.

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## ISTRAŽIVANJE PROFESIONALNOG IDENTITETA STRUKOVNIH NASTAVNIKA

Bojana Vignjević Korotaj

*Specifičnosti karijernog puta strukovnih nastavnika i njihova tranzicija iz gospodarstva u odgojno-obrazovni sustav kao i zahtjevi kontinuiranog profesionalnog razvoja nakon što postanu nastavnici može uzrokovati tenzije u njihovom profesionalnom identitetu. Svrha ovog rada je dati pregled utjecaja na profesionalni identitet strukovnih nastavnika iz makro, mezo i mikro perspektive kako bi se omogućio cjelovit pogled na kompleksnost njihovog profesionalnog*

*identiteta. Pregled literature upućuje na to da je na makro razini važno istražiti kako se obrazovne politike spuštaju na razinu škole i nastavnika te kako status strukovnog obrazovanja i osposobljavanja u zemlji može utjecati na strukovne nastavnike. Na mezo razini valja istražiti odnose strukovnih nastavnika s različitim dionicima kao i institucionalnu podršku pri kontinuiranom profesionalnom razvoju. Na mikro razini važno je steći uvid u osobne biografije strukovnih nastavnika istražujući njihovu društvenu pozadinu, prethodna obrazovna i profesionalna iskustva i razloge odabira nastavničke profesije.*

**Ključne riječi:** *strukovni nastavnici; profesionalni identitet iz makro, mezo i mikro perspektive; strukovno obrazovanje i osposobljavanje*