The Quality of Vocational Teachers: teacher education, institutional roles and professional reality

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ABSTRACT What are quality vocational teachers? This article analyzes the different factors exerting an influence on the professional knowledge, practices and performance of teaching staff involved in technical and vocational education and training (TVET). The international variety of vocational teacher education patterns, profiles and recruitment practices is presented. Any assessment of the quality of teachers’ work, be it in theory or practice, needs to be considered against the background of the institutional environment in which they practise. Hence, some common trends of institutional change within vocational education are introduced. Most particularly here, the author focuses on the professional reality of vocational teachers as made manifest in the conjoined elements of the knowledge of teachers and professional cultures. In doing so, the author draws on some empirical exemplars. The author shows how closely teacher education and the institutional contexts are entwined in the minds of teachers as well as in professional cultures. Finally, some conclusions are drawn as to what this implies for high-quality vocational teacher education and recruitment.

Introduction

An important lens that is often employed when looking at the quality of teachers and teacher education is that of the professionalism of teachers. There are two major obstacles to the professionalization of teachers in vocational education: the low status of vocational education and the problem of increasing the status of the teaching profession in general.

While vocational self-identity and trainers are essential to supporting skills development in the workforce, they are not granted high status in this role. In most industrialized countries, some two-thirds of the workforce that constitutes the backbone of the economy are intermediate-level workers and employees, who have learned a substantial part of their occupational skills and knowledge through the support of teachers, trainers and instructors in the domains of non-academic technical vocational education and human resources development (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 1998; UNESCO-UNEVOC International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training & UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2007). Given the basic importance of vocational learning for economic success, it is remarkable that its practitioners so lack the level of social recognition needed to establish it as a well-regarded profession that attracts societal affirmation as well as attracting appropriate individuals to practise as vocational educators. In many societies, vocational education and training is merely associated with conditioning for specialized jobs for the non-academic population instead of a process that almost any member of society goes through and in which he or she develops attitudes, skills and knowledge that are substantial and necessary resources for the individual to take part in economic and social life (Winch, 2000).

The low status of vocational teachers is reinforced by a second fact: vocational teaching in many late-industrial polities has had ongoing problems gaining professional recognition, and has
even been referred to as a ‘semi-profession’ (Etzioni, 1969). Yet, given the increasing emphasis on lifelong learning, teachers and trainers as learning facilitators could now be regarded as core professions in the knowledge society. Improving the standing of teachers is, therefore, a significant lever for increasing the quality of vocational education, as acknowledged by many international and national organizations. This includes the recent monitoring activities of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with regard to attracting, developing and retaining teachers, the working group of the European Union on the qualifications of teachers within the process of Education 2010, activities in the Asian context and the work of UNEVOC, the International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (Ambrosio et al, 1995; Córdova et al, 1995; Tusch et al, 1997; UNESCO Section for Technical and Vocational Education, 1997; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development et al, 2002; Frimodt et al, 2006).

Despite such activities, empirically, the significance of vocational learning is often overshadowed by the greater emphasis societies place on academic education and credentials. As regards teachers, this is embodied in the fact that many of these international studies do not make particular reference to the peculiar problems of teachers in vocational education. The last comprehensive international studies on vocational teachers occurred more than 30 years ago (International Labour Organization, 1964; UNESCO, 1973).

The low professional status of teachers in vocational education as described in the preceding paragraphs is accompanied by a fragmentation of the profession seen in the variety of existing profiles and multiple methods of teacher training and recruitment.

Basic Profiles of TVET Teachers in Different Educational Contexts

In order to understand the needs and requirements of vocational educators, it is necessary to elaborate on some of the diverse ways in which they practise. Based on the scarce information available from the studies referred to above, it is possible to distinguish the following basic professional profiles of teachers, trainers and instructors in technical and vocational education and training (TVET):

• teachers or lecturers working in formal school or college settings and providing instruction in vocational courses;
• instructors and laboratory assistants working in school or college settings in vocational laboratories who teach with a high degree of autonomy or sometimes act as assistants to other vocational teachers;
• trainers, tutors and others in enterprises who integrate training and education functions into their jobs to varying degrees (for example, from incidental to full-time teaching of trainees and apprentices) – in dual systems of vocational education, for instance, this function is often separated from human resource development functions within some companies, while in others this distinction is not strongly maintained;
• instructors and trainers working in labour market training institutions supported by governments and public authorities, often with a strong focus on social inclusion and basic occupational competences;
• instructors and trainers working in employers’ organizations, such as chambers of commerce, sectoral training institutions or privately owned training companies and providers that focus on upgrading technical competences, training in communication skills, etc. (Grollmann & Rauner, 2007).

Here, the convention is to refer to all those categories of teaching staff as vocational teachers who are working in institutions mainly devoted to the purpose of vocational learning and education, and not in enterprises or directly within the work process. However, some of the major professional challenges remain the same for all the different categories listed.

In addition to these broad categories, other professionals may be involved in TVET learning processes, such as human resource (HR) professionals – who play an important role, particularly in France and Japan – and guidance counsellors, general subject teachers, or social and youth workers, who provide specialized services. Sometimes these additional services are integrated with teaching, thus expanding the teaching or training role; sometimes they are excluded purposely, such as in the case of France, where teachers are only responsible for the actual instruction and the remainder of
the educational tasks are delegated to other staff in the school, in order to allow teachers to concentrate on their ‘core business’ (Troger & Hörner, 2007).

Vocational teachers can not only be found within the spectrum of early pre-vocational education in lower secondary education but increasingly also in adult education settings, where they deal with adults of different age groups. However, this is only one example, for the further differentiation captures the full complexity of vocational teachers’ work and its systemic determinants. A common way of distinguishing types of vocational education systems is to look at how societies organize the school-to-work transition. This leads to the distinction of four models that can be found in international comparisons: the apprenticeship model, the school-based vocational education model, the direct transition from education to work model and a model where education leads to a longer period of searching until full integration into work is achieved. Examples of the different types are: Germany and Switzerland as apprenticeship systems; France as an educational tradition that has largely integrated the vocational curriculum into vocational secondary schools; Japan as a labour market that rests on the recruitment of secondary graduates into company internal labour markets; and, finally, the USA as an example of the transition model, where young adults go through an extended sequence of changes between working, education and training and unemployment before becoming integrated into the labour market on a more consolidated basis (Rauner, 1999; Brzinsky-Fay, 2007).

Given these four basic models of school-to-work transition and the five different vocational teaching profiles introduced above, we already have 20 different profiles of TVET teachers, lecturers and instructors. The global reality is much more complex. What can be seen is that in addition to the low status of TVET and its teachers, the situation on the global level is heavily fragmented given the vast number of different profiles and functions of TVET teachers. As manifold as those profiles are the ways in which vocational teachers are recruited and prepared for their jobs. This will be described in the next section.

**Teacher Education as a Lever to Increase the Quality of TVET Teachers**

The professional skills and competences of teachers constitute a crucial factor in determining the success of the teaching processes that they enact (King Rice, 2003; Rivkin et al, 2005). One of the levers to improve the quality of vocational teachers is to raise the level of qualifications needed and the education received leading to those qualifications. On a very general level, two models of vocational teacher recruitment and training can be distinguished: a model that is based on the recruitment and preparation patterns of academic teachers and a model that is often referred to as ‘alternative recruitment’. Given the fact that vocational teachers are expected to bring work experience and specific occupational knowledge into their educational institutions, different ways of recruitment are established that deviate from those used for academic teachers (Lynch, 1998).

Often the formal credentials acquired through this route are lower than those of academic teachers. Table 1 illustrates the relative position of the different dominant TVET teacher education pathways of the countries covered by Grollmann & Rauner’s (2007) study. The first column describes the dominant formal level of TVET teacher education – from certificate-level training to a Master’s degree. The second row describes the content of the programmes. There are four types of programme:

- Purely methodological training in teaching methods. Examples are the teaching certificate in the United Kingdom as a preparatory measure or the in-service courses at the Danish Institute for Educational Training of Vocational Teachers (DEL). This is often connected to an exiting model mainly based on the recruitment of practitioners in a certain field of occupational work.
- An additive concept, which is based on the sequence of studying the subject matter (for example, at the Bachelor of Arts [BA] level) and then obtaining an appropriate entry qualification for the education sector through acquiring general teaching skills in a designated course programme (typical in the USA). This concept can also be found in Turkey, with almost 65% of the programme covering the subject matter, leading to a four-year BA degree for the prospective vocational teacher.
- A model that is based on the concurrent study of the subject matter and educational sciences, leading to a Bachelor or Master’s degree. Often the subject matter study takes the form of a
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reduced portion of an ordinary business or engineering degree. Sometimes special vocational didactics are added.

- A model based on an integrated conception of vocational disciplines, which entails the subject matter being derived from the world of work (e.g. not from the knowledge body of the respective engineering discipline but based on the knowledge that is incorporated into the respective work processes) and a model of competence development within this domain. This is called ‘integrated’ here because it is based on an inclusive conception of learning and working in a ‘trade’. This paradigm of vocational learning turned into teacher education can be found in northern German teacher education institutions and, to a certain extent, also in the reform of Norwegian and some Chinese TVET teacher education programmes. However, nowhere is it the dominant national orientation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal level</th>
<th>Content</th>
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<tr>
<td>Methodological</td>
<td>Additive concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>training</td>
<td>Vocational didactics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate, diploma</td>
<td>United Kingdom, Brazil, Japan, Denmark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>USA, France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Russia, Turkey, Norway, China</td>
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<tr>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>Germany</td>
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Table I. Formal level and content of vocational teacher education.

Another difference is the sequencing of the training and recruitment. A very common model is the in-service model, in which the teacher’s qualification is acquired within the first, usually probationary, phase of employment. The length of this qualification varies from 40 hours to a BA-equivalent degree. Typically, the in-service model does not take into account the respective subject matter. Instead, it is mainly focused on psychological and basic educational knowledge, and on teaching methods and techniques with some variations. In most cases, the precondition to employment as a vocational teacher is securing a BA degree plus having relevant work experience. Sometimes, these in-service courses are offered at the university level and sometimes in specialized public institutions tailored to teacher training, such as in the case of France’s Instituts Universitaires de Formation des Maîtres. The in-service model of teacher preparation can be found in different variations, sometimes with a short pre-service training period as the dominant model – as is the case in Denmark, the United Kingdom and the USA – and sometimes with more extended preparatory training – such as in France.

Work experience is often required in TVET as a precondition to employment as a vocational teacher. However, this is often seen as an alternative and less preferable route compared with general teacher recruitment, and is associated with lower formal expectations of teachers. When looking at individual career paths in countries with high demands on the formal side of recruitment, occupational experiences are very common. Even in Germany, which maintains the highest formal level in terms of academic requirements for entering the vocational teaching field, there is usually an amount of real work experience prescribed through the university curricula. The majority of student teachers in Germany hold an occupational qualification in their field, and if they lack this qualification, they have to undergo an internship in an enterprise.

For many countries with a consecutive sequence of teacher training (subject matter first, then educational qualification), the BA is the typical entry requirement for enrolling into teacher preparation courses. Some of the former specialized teacher training institutions have been, or will be, transformed into institutions with university status in Europe consistent with the European-wide prescriptions provided through the Bologna process (European Ministers of Education, 1999), which opens up new possibilities for those who have obtained teaching qualifications to further their studies at the Master of Arts (MA) level.

Even though the integrated model has been held as the most promising model of teacher education already in early publications (International Labour Organization, 1964) only limited progress has been made in establishing such kind of programmes. In the midst of this plethora of
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models, the most significant challenge remains the integration of subject matter and pedagogical training.

Attempts are being made in some European countries to build coherent research and training programmes that reflect the integration of subject matter and pedagogy in TVET. One example of this kind of integration is the idea of research on ‘occupational clusters’ (Berufsfeldwissenschaften), as developed within the Working Group on Gewerblich-Technische Wissenschaften in the Gesellschaft für Arbeitswissenschaften network of German university institutes for the training of vocational teachers and trainers in technical domains of work. In this process, all research activities are focused on ‘core problems’ and ‘developmental tasks’ within specific occupational clusters, such as manufacturing, electronics, information and communication technology, etc. There is a similar approach being used in the French discussion on ergonomics. This approach was taken up by the recent initiative of UNESCO-UNEVOC, the United TVET Network on Innovation and Professional Development (UNIP), and its Hangzhou Declaration, which delineates 12 vocational disciplines in an international framework curriculum for a Master’s degree for TVET teachers and lecturers.[1]

So, in these ways, alongside the fragmentation of profiles and functions, there are also huge variations as to the approach to initial vocational teacher preparation. Teacher preparation programmes differ in terms of content, their formal level, their ways of recruitment and in the way they combine academic study with practical teaching experience.

Changing Institutions and Mission of Vocational Teachers

Apart from the programmes of initial preparation of vocational teachers, the concrete circumstances within schools and colleges – the work environment of vocational teachers – also constitute an important factor influencing their professional performance. Given the huge variety of traditions of vocational education and learning, it is difficult to generalize about the factors that shape their practice. Nevertheless, the work teachers are confronted with can be clustered into the following tasks everywhere:

• supporting the technical or professional learning processes of students, which requires teachers to integrate knowledge about the content as well as the appropriate methods and forms of learning;
• preparation of students for work through the support of learning processes leading to general work-related attitudes and competences as well as their role in society;
• assessment and evaluation of students’ learning processes;
• administrative tasks regarding organization and the curriculum;
• counselling functions for students, but increasingly also for other target groups, such as employers, adult learners, etc. (Bader, 1995).

These tasks are affected by a changing conception of the role and functions of education and learning in general, and TVET in particular and globally. Changes in the labour markets and work organizations affect the practice of vocational education and learning on the very practical level of what is available and can be enacted in TVET institutions (Lipsmeier, 2001a, b). Research is scarce on how these developments have an impact on the practices of TVET institutions. One example of such an impact is that institutions that provide vocational learning are increasingly given new roles on a regional level. Vocational colleges are often expected to be supporting sectoral innovation or managing regionally available learning provision, instead of being just an operative unit of higher level educational administration (Rosenfeld, 1998a, b; Rosenbaum, 2002). For instance, TVET colleges play a role not only in initial education but also provide continuing education to skilled workers in the use of new technologies and the command of industrial processes. There is also a devolution of competences to individual schools that goes along on the notion that learning can be managed and administered best from levels that are as close to the practical needs as possible. For example, many, but not all, TVET systems have given a considerable share of curricular decision making to the level of individual schools to provide for possibilities to adapt their programmes to specific regional learning needs. Increasing degrees of institutional autonomy trickle down to the level of individual teachers. This rise in freedom and breadth of task also constitutes an increase in
responsibility and expectations: for example, teachers themselves are responsible for making informed decisions about the relevance of certain curricular content (Santema, 1997).

Devolution has brought about new systems of quality assurance in order to secure a common level of quality across different institutions. The need for quality assurance is, in addition, boosted by an increasing awareness of public accountability. This places an additional pressure on teachers’ performance.

In one of the few international comparative assessments of different types of institutions of vocational education, Kurz (2002) describes different types of vocational colleges on two axes: ‘institutional autonomy’ and ‘integration of initial and continuing TVET’ (see Table II).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integration of initial and continuing TVET</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>High</th>
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<tr>
<td>Institutional autonomy</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Germany, Austria, Switzerland</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Netherlands, England, Denmark, Scotland</td>
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Table II. Mapping development perspectives for vocational schools and colleges for some European countries and regions (adapted from Kurz, 2002).

As Table II shows, it is Scotland and England as well as the Netherlands and Denmark that are ranked relatively high on both dimensions. In those countries that are ranked high on these dimensions, this may unfold as a particular strength in future development given the trends described earlier. Similar institutional environments can be found in other countries, such as Canada and the USA with their community colleges. In contrast, the structure of German schools as public institutions turns out to be a barrier to innovation (Gerds, 1995). This weakness has, however, been addressed by some of the German Länder and also in the Austrian vocational schools system. They have moved to grant greater autonomy for vocational schools and teachers. Another type is the Italian configurations, where very innovative regional TVET providers exist which are not integrated into initial education and, therefore, might be excluded from very important functions within TVET (Rosenfeld, 1998a).

The two preceding sections have shown that there are huge variations in context in the determining of teachers’ practice in TVET. Given the classical criteria of professionalization, such as teacher preparation and education, vocational teachers in some European (for example, Germany and France) countries have reached a relatively high degree of professionalization in accordance with their colleagues in general education. However, when looking at some of the future challenges for the TVET institutions – for example, the new functions that schools and colleges take on the regional level or increasing autonomy – institutions from Anglo-Saxon traditions rank higher. Interestingly, those systems are often based on lower formal expectations with regard to teachers’ professional preparation and, to a larger extent, on alternative recruitment patterns. This shows that the classical criteria that are being applied by traditional indicator-oriented professionalization research might be misleading when trying to assess the quality of vocational teachers and their education.

**Professional Reality of Vocational Teachers**

The preceding section has identified some global tendencies and local practices that stand as important factors in the shaping of the professional practice of vocational teachers. However, this only gives a superficial impression of the complex professional reality in which vocational teachers are working. It has been argued that the institutional dimension is at least as important as the question of teacher education when striving for professional quality and high professional performance. Often, this institutional dimension has been overlooked and professionalization has been mainly seen as a function of the formal level of teacher education. Only in a few cases has the everyday practice of vocational teachers been made an object of research (Holling & Bammé, 1982; Camp & Heath-Camp, 1990; Camp, 2001; Lempert, 2001) in national contexts.

In the early stages of research into professional identity, the focus was primarily on developing indicators as to when a specific occupational group was to be deemed a profession, as
opposed to an ordinary occupation (Carr-Saunders & Wilson, 1964). Subsequently, the focus of research has increasingly looked at the particularities of work in the professions (for example, the interaction between the professional and the client) and the specific knowledge needed to perform in a professional situation (Oevermann, 1996). A promising strand of research now tries to combine methods from expertise and professionalization research in order to explore the professional knowledge which comes into play in the interaction between the professional and the client or, more specifically, between the teacher and the learner (Bromme, 1992; Mieg, 2003). This perspective has, up until now, neither been applied to vocational teachers nor to the question of their quality in a comparative perspective.

In a research project on the 'professional reality' of vocational teachers in three different countries (Grollmann, 2005), special attention was paid to the interplay between the knowledge of vocational teachers and the particular form of the institutions of vocational education. Interviews were conducted with teachers in German vocational schools, American high schools and community colleges, as well as Danish vocational education colleges. The interviews dealt with teachers’ understanding of vocational education tasks, their biographical background and their conditions of work. Before discussing the empirical results of this research, it is necessary to add a few further conceptual remarks.

Process Knowledge of Vocational Education and Professional Culture

In order to provide a more grounded perspective on the professional challenges and reality of TVET, teachers were conceptualized as having been shaped by both the subjective and the objective (in accordance with the ‘Good Work’ approach of Gardner et al [2001]). Practice was reconstructed through the analysis of teachers’ process knowledge of vocational education and their professional culture. The term ‘process knowledge of vocational education’ was introduced by Gerds (2001) in accordance with the term ‘work process knowledge’ (Boreham et al, 2002). It describes the domains of knowledge that must be taken into consideration in the fulfillment of the professional tasks of vocational teachers. Besides explicit knowledge (for example, knowledge of educational methods, knowledge and teaching of subjects) and formal knowledge of the education system and the educational establishment, Gerds emphasizes the implicit knowledge of vocational teachers (practical experience in work and teaching, vocational pedagogical skills, etc.) and their ‘informal’ knowledge of the life world of the educational establishment. Therefore, alongside teacher education and teachers’ vocational biographies, the form of institutionalization of vocational education takes on a particular significance in the explanation and description of the knowledge of vocational teachers. Teachers’ understanding of their tasks and their subject knowledge, their learning experience and their attitude and motivation with regard to taking up the teaching profession represent meaningful foci for investigation, and indicators of the knowledge of vocational education processes. The term ‘professional culture’ refers to the social embeddedness of teachers’ knowledge and actions (Terhart, 1996; Hargreaves, 1997; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001), i.e. both to the social context of professional action and to the fact that this context is determined by its members. It follows that the empirical investigation of different professional cultures in vocational education institutions requires a focus on the following: (a) the vocational biographies of the teachers; (b) the forms of cooperation among the teaching staff of an institution; (c) their participation in processes of school development and innovation; (d) quality assurance within vocational education, as well as the tasks assumed by vocational teachers; and (e) their cooperation with the world of work outside the educational establishment. Together, these represent a comprehensive way of accounting for the process knowledge required to understand teachers’ practice.

The next section uses two instances out of this spectrum to illustrate the different forms of process knowledge of vocational education and professional cultures which occur in practice in different contextual settings.
Findings Regarding the Knowledge of Vocational Education Processes

In conducting the interviews with teachers, two lines of reasoning emerged. The first of these is referred to as the diagnostic perspective. It foregrounds the characteristics of the pedagogical clientele (i.e. the pupils, students or trainees). Central to this are the specific problems that occur as a result of the heterogeneous background and abilities of the learners. The second perspective, which is referred to as the learning process perspective, is based more on general statements on the organization of teaching and learning and its conditions. This perspective detaches itself from the very concrete teaching and learning considerations, and concentrates on general statements and assumptions about methods, teaching and learning goals, and the course of learning processes.

With regard to the contents of vocational education, two clearly different perspectives can be identified which, in analogy with classical educational theory (Klafki, 1964, 1985), I shall describe as formal and material. The formal perspective reasons mainly with abstract, non-subject-related or methodical contents. Examples of this are lines of reasoning which emphasize so-called meta-competences or key qualifications, as well as fundamental behavioural norms (i.e. choosing between different ways of treating the shape of the curriculum – between, say, multidisciplinary and independent learning objects or contents). On the other hand, the material perspective orients itself strongly to the actual practical context, where the application of knowledge is paramount. Here, typical lines of reasoning concern the preparation for the tasks that have to be fulfilled later in employment, or ‘requirements of technology’. As a rule, the material perspective represents the subject and pedagogical competence of the teacher as being directly connected with each other.

Table II includes the following ideal-typical combinations:

- Instructional design: concentration on the teaching ability of the teacher, where contents are apparently interchangeable.
- Training: contents and ‘pedagogical relationship’ are defined in reciprocity, and learning goals and processes outweigh observance of the students’ characteristics.
- Learning accompaniment: focuses strongly on the background conditions and characteristics of the learners and the content is not context-based.
- Mastership: capability linked to the subject matter forms a unity with the pedagogical task and offers an authentic source of respect.

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<th>Formal</th>
<th>Material</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process-oriented</td>
<td>Instructional design</td>
<td>Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(attribute of learning)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis-oriented</td>
<td>Learning accompaniment</td>
<td>Mastership/mentor model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(attribute of the learner)</td>
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Table III. Ideal types of the conceptualization of vocational education core tasks.

Using this matrix, it is possible to map the actual ‘real types’ unearthed in the respondents’ answers.[3] Examples of a pronounced formal conception are to be found especially among the Danish and the German teachers who occupy a relatively high rank in the school hierarchy. Instructional design is most commonplace within the context of the German and Danish schools. Those German teachers who have to deal with difficult learner populations share the perspective of learning accompaniment. Teaching as training is encountered particularly amongst American college instructors, where the mastership model is typical for high school teachers – as it is sometimes for those German teachers mainly involved in teaching practical applications.

This illustrates that some of the broad trends identified above are locally embedded in a variety of local practices, enacted in and through vocational teachers who have certain conceptions about their different pedagogical tasks and the means to achieve them. It clearly underlines the recursive relationship between the knowledge and attitudes (the process knowledge of vocational education) of vocational teachers and their professional cultures. Both are embedded in certain institutional arrangements of teacher education, on the one hand, and TVET practice, on the other.

In the preceding paragraphs this interdependency was analyzed with a focus on the knowledge and attitudes of teachers. In the following paragraphs it will be examined from the angle of the
professional culture and the institutional arrangements in which the practice of vocational teachers is enacted and transforms it constantly.

Transformation of Professional Cultures of Vocational Education by Means of Individual Strategies

Statements were examined in which the interviewees reported on their own strategies for resolving particular tasks or problems encountered in the course of their everyday school work. ‘Own’ is stressed here because throughout this analysis, particular attention was paid to strategies which had their origin in individual teachers’ initiatives or ideas, rather than formalized descriptions of tasks. I have subsequently categorized these strategies into groups with similar content. With regard to individual strategies for creating connections to the world of work, the American vocational teachers appear to be more advanced from a quantitative viewpoint (see Figure 1, ‘link to work’). This can be explained as a consequence of their background – i.e. being recruited directly from the vocational field – and their ‘task of mediation’ in the labour market – for example, finding ‘placements’ being part of their task. It also has to do with the statutes of the institutions and their strict reporting duties to the regional ‘community’ (irrespective of whether or not they are high schools or community colleges).

Figure 1. Direction of individual strategies of vocational teachers.

Whereas the American vocational teachers interviewed in this study frequently reported on their initiatives with regard to establishing and maintaining cooperation with enterprises located in their region, this was far less common in the case of the Danish and German teachers. Even though these two systems of vocational education are so-called ‘dual systems’, it is a functional practice to differentiate the individual teacher’s role from that of the trainer/instructor in an enterprise. In the particular case of German teachers, they were primarily focused on initiatives aimed at improving cooperation between the teaching staff and organizational strategies. To put it another way, the
form of the organization and the need to foster a culture of cooperation were seen to be the principal fields necessary for school innovation.

In contrast to this, many Danish teachers conceptualized learning processes much more strongly as a collective task belonging to the respective team. The main field of improvement was reorganization of the educational process with regard to the subjective learning paths of individual learners. At the time this analysis was being compiled, a large part of the pedagogical energy expended by Danish teachers was focused on the attempt to adapt learning paths to the needs of learners.

So, we might conclude from this study that the imperatives and arrangements on the level of the institution of each TVET system had particular consequences for teachers’ practices in terms of how they practised, and the kinds of goals and purposes with which they engaged in their practice.

The Quality of Vocational Teachers: the dilemma between grounded and formal professionalization

This analysis has looked at the quality of teachers in two ways. The first perspective has focused on the quality of teachers with regard to their level of education, their formal status and similar variables. This perspective is closely connected to an indicator-based professionalization concept, as established in the early days of professionalization theory. The second perspective has been a conceptualization of the quality of teachers by focusing on their professional tasks and current and future practical challenges. This may be termed a ‘grounded’ look at teachers’ professionalization.

There is a huge diversity of models of teacher education, teaching profiles and recruitment patterns in TVET globally. More than teaching in general education, teaching in vocational education has often failed to be acknowledged, despite its significance, ubiquity and its assumed contribution to the welfare, maintenance and progress of society. So-called alternative patterns of teacher recruitment, education and training still prevail in many countries and are seen as an inferior solution to standard patterns of teacher education. All in all, this diversity in content and forms means that vocational teacher education structures are still a long way from being part of a well-established and accepted international academic discourse.

At the same time, the mission of TVET has changed significantly over recent decades. This has led to new ways of organizing learning and instruction, new ways of shaping institutional roles and governance within TVET schools and colleges, and new paradigms of cooperation between the wide range of staff profiles involved in TVET. On the one hand, this demands a high level of holistic knowledge, competences and commitment on the part of vocational teachers in order to participate as well-equipped stakeholders in these processes. On the other hand, in many cases, very specific knowledge is required, which is very close to technological developments and forms of knowledge that are bound to specific production processes and their organization in their respective fields of work.

The empirical findings of qualitative research with vocational teachers from three different contexts have exemplified the dense entanglements between teachers’ views on their professional tasks and practices and the shape of the institutions in which they work. This was done on the basis of two examples: the teachers’ views and concepts of teaching and learning processes (as an example of their process knowledge), and their individual strategies of institutional change (as an example of their professional culture). In some ways, these findings can be interpreted as a sign that, notwithstanding the lower degree of formal education of vocational teachers, some of the institutional challenges can be coped with based on alternative patterns of education and recruitment. For example, it is almost a counter-intuitive result that the most visible efforts for cooperation between schools and companies can be identified in the interviews with US teachers and not in the so-called ‘dual systems’ of Denmark and Germany.

Much more than is often apparent in teacher education programmes, it is the concrete conditions of work that primarily influence the understanding of vocational pedagogical tasks, the professional self-image, ways of cooperation, and other essential dimensions of the process knowledge of vocational education and the professional culture of vocational teachers. Therefore, formally highly professionalized models of teacher training (such as in Germany) come under considerable pressure to justify themselves publically. Many of the competences promulgated in
the course of teacher training cannot be turned into practice in the reality of vocational colleges as long as they are largely rigid and bureaucratized institutions. However, flexible recruitment patterns in very dynamic institutions might lead to innovative professional cultures, taking into account the very special nature of vocational education as opposed to academic education. Nonetheless, they might fail to produce the knowledge base and commitment that would be needed for a long-term sustainable development of quality in vocational education.

What is needed is a strategy for the development of quality vocational teachers which not only balances policies that improve the individual learning of teachers, their education and preparation for their job, but also takes into account the continuous reform and dynamics of their institutions and tasks. The institutions are the environments that need to allow for the teachers’ knowledge and skills to be enacted quite autonomously, but they should also manifest the cooperation between different specific profiles of vocational teaching expertise.

Policies developed to cultivate and underpin the professionalization of vocational teachers are often associated with high-level structural considerations, which are seen in particular public indicators such as the level of teacher education or payment. This view is in danger of overlooking the importance of the concrete working conditions of teachers in TVET institutions and the specific demands in vocational education. More than in what is classically regarded as academic education, then, quality here rests on good cooperation between different profiles of teachers – so-called alternative models of teacher education, which have often been looked at with suspicion by teacher education associations. However, to some extent, they are a consequence of the specific nature of vocational education and cannot, and should not, be abandoned. A sustainable strategy of professionalization and quality vocational teacher education needs to take into account formal and more grounded aspects of vocational education. A monolithic approach to promoting the quality of vocational teachers that rests on high-level education and preparation of individual teachers needs to be complemented by policies which acknowledge some of the specific challenges in this field, such as the very specific nature of vocational knowledge and the need for cooperation between different profiles of vocational teachers and the surrounding community in the world of work.

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Notes

[2] All in all, 45 interviews in 11 case studies were carried out.
[3] Due to the restricted space available, I have left out the sample interview transcripts. The interested reader is referred to Grollmann (2005).

References


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