

Identity of Vocational Education and Training Teacher: Pathways and Competences

Peter Marinič

Masaryk University, Faculty of Education, Brno, Czech Republic

marinic@ped.muni.cz

Abstract: A teacher's identity can be understood as comprehensive approach to the self-concept of the teacher and the teacher's external environment. The teacher's identity already begins to form during the teacher's preparation for the future teaching profession. The requirements about necessary education and requested competences for the teaching profession are usually set by the state institution such as Ministry of Education. Even though the current conditions for becoming a vocational education and training (VET) teacher are relatively strict, in practice there are teachers in secondary vocational schools whose preparation for the profession varies greatly. It often happens that VET teachers have undergone a transition from the practical economic sphere to the teaching profession, transition from the branch expert to the VET teacher. Vocational education is an important part of the education system, preparing pupils directly for the labour market needs. For most pupils, it is the last formal form of education in their lives. In the Czech Republic, approximately 70% of the population is educated in vocational education every year. The paper identifies main pathways to the identity of VET teacher, consisting of the professional identity of an expert in relevant field and the professional identity of a teacher. When the identity of VET teacher is created, there is often a "boundary crossing" associated with the creation of a new identity, or problems with the loss of the original identity. The intertwining of the teacher's identity areas subsequently affects development of wider spectrum of competences. These competences need to be developed in the preparation of VET teachers or they can be related to the requirements for the performance of the profession of VET teacher. They can be divided into general pedagogical competences, competences in the field of branch didactics and professional competences of the expert in relevant field. Teachers also participate in the implementation of the curriculum in a particular school and thus become part of the practical side of educational policy. The above-mentioned approaches thus create the basis for the subsequent investigation of "teacher agency" in the conditions of vocational education.

Keywords: Teacher identity, Teacher professional identity, Vocational education, Identity pathways, Teacher competencies

1. Introduction

Teachers represent an important personality in the development of human knowledge of each human being in our society and they also play an irreplaceable role in the education of future generations. Everyone in society, whether it is a pupil, student, parent, or the public, has a certain idea of what a teacher should look like – the ideas about teacher's behaviour, abilities, and approaches to the education process and to the profession. These opinions vary due to the development of society, the cultural and social conditions in which teachers work, the type of school, and many other factors. Teachers also perceive themselves in the role of a teacher, as a representative of the teaching profession, considering not only the mentioned areas but a lot of other aspects influencing them on personal, professional, cultural, social, and other levels (Fejes & Köpsen, 2014; Vähäsantanen & Hämäläinen, 2019). They are influenced by the concept of their own competences and the meaning of their lives, which also includes, among other things, the role of a teacher and the performance of the teaching profession. All these factors influence the teacher's identity.

The identity of a teacher is variable, both, over time and across the various contexts in which the teacher works, including especially cultural and sociological aspects. Therefore, the teacher's identity includes psychological personal factors, social and socio-cultural factors, and societal factors.

Teachers in vocational education and training (VET teachers) are a specific group of teachers that is part of all education systems in every country. Of course, VET teachers have some characteristics in common with other teachers (teachers of general education subjects), but VET teachers differ from other teachers especially in their focus on professional areas directly related to the performance of their profession. VET teachers focus on the professional component of education – branch expertise – which is different from the focus of general education subjects. Although all teachers should be an expert in their field of education (in their specific subjects), should be able to convey this educational content in an appropriate form to students, and should take into account the educational and social needs of students within the education process at the same time, for VET teachers, the component of educational content and appropriate didactic analysis of the curriculum and didactic transformation are more emphasized. This approach is consistent with the concept of pedagogical-content knowledge and Shulman's point of view on education process (1986). In boarded context of teacher's identity analysis also the Flower model can be useful (Vloet et al., 2020).

One main difference between VET and general education teachers is that it is common for teachers of general education subjects to decide about their future career as a teacher already during their studies and obtain their qualifications precisely through university studies for teaching the chosen subjects, while for VET teachers, this path to their profession is not dominant. For VET teachers it is more common, that in their early career they work in the field of expertise in which they were educated, often educated "only" at the level of secondary vocational school, achieve a certain degree of recognition in this profession (field of expertise) and only after that move into the teaching profession. There is therefore a considerable number of VET teachers who first developed a professional expert's identity, or as Sarastuen (2020) defines it professional work identity, in the relevant field of their expertise and only because of a change of profession they develop a professional teacher's identity. There is thus a significant impact of two identities, which intertwine and transfer from one identity to another, which is also associated with concept of boundaries crossing.

2. Identity of the Vocational Education and Training Teachers

Although identity, as well as teacher's identity, has been a widely researched phenomenon over the last few decades, examining the identity of VET teachers is a relatively neglected focus. Relevant studies about VET teachers' identity are written predominantly by authors from Scandinavia (see Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Vähäsantanen, 2015; Vähäsantanen & Hämäläinen, 2019; Sarastuen, 2020) or Australia (see Chan, 2012; Green, 2015; Tran & Nguyen, 2015).

In those studies, authors emphasize the important position of VET teachers within the education system, when the dominant task of vocational education and training is the adequate preparation of pupils for the future performance of a profession in the relevant field. Preparations of pupils takes place both, within the school, and in connection with business from economic practice, regardless the differences in education system in individual countries. Due to the considerable number of fields required by the labour market and the wide variety of teaching methods for preparing pupils to the future profession, vocational education and training is thus a very diverse system. Also, a common feature in the mentioned education systems is the effort to increase the quality of education, and the related reforms that are taking place in the given education systems. One of their influences is the effort to increase the qualification of VET teachers in the form of a prescribed and required university qualification, alternatively, supplementing the needed qualification of VET teachers through further education (Canrinus et al., 2019). Even despite these efforts, there are teachers working in vocational education and training whose basic qualification for the profession of VET teacher consists in the experience they have gained through the direct performance of the given profession in economic practice. In this sense, the situation in the mentioned countries, especially in Scandinavian countries, does not differ significantly from the situation in the Czech Republic. In the Czech Republic, there are tendencies to improve the quality of the education process in general, and specifically in vocational education and training. These tendencies can be noted both, at the level of educational policy strategy, influencing the main ideas of the development of education in the Czech Republic, and at the level of requirements for the qualification of VET teachers.

In the Czech Republic, there is the effort to slim down the branch structure of vocational education and training, to increase the portion of general education subjects and general specific vocational subjects in the first years of secondary vocational education and postpone the actual specialization in the vocational education of the pupils to the later years of the education process. All those ideas are connected to the improvement of the quality of education via curriculum adjustment based on the current educational policy in the Czech Republic. Approximately 70% of a population of given year in the Czech Republic is preparing for a future profession in secondary vocational education, which is the highest percentage in the EU for a long time (Marinič & Pecina, 2021). It seems the vocational education and training is very popular in the Czech Republic. However, according to the surveys among the parents of the future pupils of secondary schools, secondary grammar schools and the general-education focus is preferred. Even though the benefit of vocational education and training for graduates of secondary vocational schools is a benefit for the labour market, society prefers a general-educational focus in secondary schools (Tran & Nguyen, 2015).

In accordance with the effort to improve the quality of secondary vocational education, the Ministry of Education in the Czech Republic adjusted the conditions for obtaining a teacher's qualification for in vocational education and training at master level so that only graduates of the master's program in the relevant professional field of expertise can enrol in the given master education program at pedagogical faculties of the universities or other institutions preparing the future teachers. This may appear justified, as its goal is to increase the quality of the education process through the expected increase in the qualification level of the VET teachers. At the same time, it corresponds to the tendencies that are also manifested in the Scandinavian countries. In

practice, this means that master university education programs for future VET teachers have not longer been offered in the Czech Republic. In other words, the training of qualified experts in the teaching profession for the needs of professional education does not take place in practice, thus there will be not sufficient VET teachers in the future to preserve the actual portion of secondary vocational school in comparison to other types of secondary schools. At the same time, however, there are many VET teachers in practice whose qualification is based on completed secondary vocational school education in the relevant field of expertise and often even without adequate, or even any, pedagogical and didactic education. These teachers are employed by exception because the school principal was unable to find a qualified VET teacher.

In connection with the identity of VET teachers, it is possible to identify the significant influence of their previous work in the given field, in which they achieved a certain recognition and thus gained invaluable experience. The transfer of the experience and knowledge by VET teachers into teaching practice is significant. For these teachers, the original identity, i.e., the professional expert's identity, is supplemented with a new, professional teacher's identity. Teachers create this professional teacher's identity either through education in the pedagogical and didactic field, or even through direct teaching in pedagogical practice. Thus, several possibilities for the development of a teacher's identity can be identified, i.e., the pathways of VET teacher to a teacher's identity as a complex identity containing the professional expert's identity and professional teacher's identity.

These pathways typically imply certain signs of identity change. The process of teacher's identity creation involves, at least to some extent, leaving the original profession of expert in given field and shifting considerable time, energy, and effort to the new profession of the teacher. VET teachers are crossing boundary (between identities) in connection with a change of identity, or with the creation of a new identity – a professional teacher's identity. This crossing of boundary cannot be understood only as a move from one profession to another, i.e., from the point of view of losing one identity and gaining another new identity, but it also needs to be viewed as a long-term phenomenon, enabling VET teachers to simultaneously use both identities (Chan, 2012; Fejes & Köpsén, 2014).

Boundary crossing (between identities) brings both negatives and positives to VET teachers (Fejes & Köpsén, 2014). Among the negatives are the feeling of loss of original identity, when teachers may feel discomfort, arising from the impossibility of continuing to fully perform their original profession in their field of expertise, connected with the loss of feelings associated with the performance of this original profession. In other words, VET teachers may feel that they have had to let something go (Sarastuen, 2020). At the same time, they may feel insecure due to insufficient pedagogical and didactic competences, especially in managing the education process, approach to pupils, use of suitable organizational forms or teaching methods. On the other hand, even in this context there can be positives associated with the duality of the identity of VET teachers. This means that VET teachers can look at pedagogical and didactic problems in teaching from a perspective of their original professional expert's identity and use this insight to solve the problem in teaching. At the same time, if VET teachers retain both identities and work to maintain their original professional expert's identity, they are considered experts in their field who adequately prepare future graduates of secondary vocational schools to apply to the needs of the labour market. VET teachers can achieve this either by remaining partially active in the relevant field of their expertise or through further education in the given professional field. In addition to boundary crossing, VET teachers encounter moments in practical teaching that further shape the formation of identity, both the original identity, i.e., the professional expert's identity, and the newly acquired identity, i.e., the professional teacher's identity. These "bumpy" moments are characterized by the fact that they force VET teachers to step out of their comfort zone and solve the situation immediately (Vloet et al., 2020). VET teachers can therefore use both, their original professional expert's identity and the newly acquired professional teacher's identity, and the competences resulting from both to solve these moments.

3. Pathways Towards the Identity of Vocational Education and Training Teachers

The identity of VET teachers is multilevel. However, it includes at least two identities – the professional expert's identity and the professional teacher's identity – which interact and intertwine. Several possibilities of entering the VET teacher profession can be distinguished. These possibilities consist formal requirements for the performance of the profession in the form of undergraduate teaching training with applied practice or in the form of further education. These ways can thus be characterized as pathways to the identity of a VET teacher and can be identified through the following conceptualization.

The first formed and comprehensively created identity of future VET teachers is the professional expert's identity, due to the requirements for undergraduate training of future teachers, but also due to the applied practice in the past, in the conditions of Czech Republic as well as in the other countries. This professional

expert's identity is already formed during the initial preparation of the future teachers due to their education at secondary schools, typically secondary vocational school of the relevant field. The relevant field is the one which the given individuals want to devote themselves to in practice in the future. Usually, at the time of choosing a secondary school and in the first years of secondary school education, those individuals are undecided about becoming a teacher. However, this education already forms the professional expert's identity of the future teachers. It is therefore important how education takes place at secondary vocational schools and what competences a future potential teachers acquire here. Furthermore, the professional expert's identity of a future potential teachers can be developed through university studies in the relevant field, or it develops in the applied practice of the given field, when the professional competences of the given individuals are further developed.

In cases where individuals decide to become a future VET teachers at the end of secondary school education, without interrupting the educational path, the future VET teachers enter university training for teaching in vocational education and training. Pedagogical and didactic competences are usually developed in general during the university training for teaching. But during the university training for teaching in vocational education and training, the relevant general or specific branch didactic competences are also developed. These competences will the given future VET teachers use in their teaching practice. This leads to the development of the teacher's identity, comprising professional teacher's identity and professional expert's identity. However, if during this period the future VET teachers does not have practical ties to the chosen field, for example at least occasional partial work involvement in economic practice or does not carry out entrepreneurial activities, then their professional expert's identity remains purely formed by their pedagogical study and the experiences future VET teachers gained in their education. The change of identity may not be significantly felt by the future VET teachers at this stage. Nevertheless, already in this period there is a change and intertwine of the professional expert's identity and the professional teacher's identity, from which some of the above-mentioned positives and negatives can occurred.

In cases where future potential teachers, who have completed university study in non-pedagogical education program in the relevant field after secondary school or have acquired professional competencies through the practical experiences in entrepreneurial activities, enter the university training for future VET teachers the professional teacher's identity develops. It is like the previous mentioned case; however, the change of teacher's identity tends to be more demanding. It is due to the original professional expert's identity has been longer formed, the future VET teachers usually achieve a certain recognition in the given field of expertise, and a strong original professional expert's identity makes it difficult to form a new professional teacher's identity. In other words, future VET teachers prioritize educational content over its appropriate didactically processed form. This prioritization of future VET teachers also affects the professional teacher's identity creation related with the development of pedagogical and didactic competences. This fact is often supported by practical experience, which can be different from theoretical approaches, and thus puts individuals in opposition to the information presented during the university training for future VET teachers, based on which a new professional teacher's identity is formed.

In practice, there is another possible way of building the identity of VET teachers, which is related to the direct transition of an experts in given field of expertise into teaching practice. In this case, the future VET teachers are thus exposed to direct pedagogical action, without previous pedagogical and didactic preparation. VET teaches lack general pedagogical and didactic competences, but also the ability to adequately use subject-specific didactic competences by VET teachers is limited. VET teachers can overcome the inconvenient moment during the teaching, due to their strong original professional expert's identity since they can approach the pupils as new colleagues who need to be trained in the practice of the given field of expertise. Since in this case it is a teacher with a strong original professional expert's identity, with considerable experience in the given field and with applied practice in the given field, this does not represent an insurmountable problem for the future VET teacher.

4. Competencies According to Identities

In summary, several pathways to the emergence of the identity of VET teachers can be identified, when these teachers create, transform and merge professional expert's identity and the professional teacher's identity. The intertwining of these two identities thus creates three areas that can be linked to the competences of future VET teachers.

The purely professional expert's identity of VET teacher is associated with professional competences significant for the relevant field and applied practice in the relevant field of expertise. Under the conditions of the Czech

education system, these professional competences are already part of secondary vocational education, and they are also further developed, especially for students of relevant fields of expertise in university education with a non-pedagogical focus. These professional competences are developed both, at the level of theoretical knowledge and at the level of practical skills and abilities, even to a certain extent in attitudes. Thus, there is a comprehensive development of cognitive, psychomotor, and affective areas in the future potential VET teacher in the relevant professional area.

The second area of competences development, in connection with a purely professional teacher's identity, is the development of pedagogical and didactic competences in general. Here, the given competences are developed mainly through university studies in the relevant educational program focused on the training for practical teaching and professional subjects at the faculties of pedagogy, or at other institutes preparing future VET teachers in terms of pedagogy. The development of these competences relates to areas of identification with appropriate educational theories, a didactic approach to the education process in general, issues of educational impact on pupils, or areas of classroom management and the functioning of the school and school system.

The third area, which is typical of the intertwining of professional expert's identity and professional teacher's identity of VET teachers, is the area of branch-oriented didactic competences. The development of these competences can occur both in the institutionalized educational environment of faculties of education or other institutions preparing future VET teachers, but the acquisition of these competences can also occur through the direct pedagogical experience of VET teachers, as described above. The development of these competences focuses mainly on didactic knowledge of the content and the ability to adequately transform educational content to the educational needs of pupils, regarding the organization of the educational process and the fulfilment of the educational goals set in the framework educational program in the conditions of the Czech Republic. These competences, even if they may seem simple at first glance, involve significant demands. This is particularly evident for VET teachers with a significantly developed original professional expert's identity, as they prefer professional content to its didactically processed form of content, which is the more comprehensible form for pupils, also more suitable for the educational process and more adequate to the educational needs of pupils. It is not only important to understand the professional content of the curriculum but VET teachers need to develop the ability and competences to ensure that this content, as part of the education process, is adequately adapted to the educational needs of the pupils, without losing the professional content and context. It is so well-known that not everyone who understands the given field of expertise is also able to teach it to others in an appropriate way. The process of education requires knowledge of appropriate didactic teaching methods specific in the field of expertise, the choice of an appropriate organizational form of education and the use of appropriate, but for schools still available, teaching resources, tools, and aids.

5. Discussion

The presented conceptualization of the approach to the identity of VET teachers is in line with the approaches of authors from Scandinavian countries (see Sarastuen, 2020; Fejes & Köpsén, 2014; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Paths to the identity of VET teachers describe the possibilities of acquiring and developing two components of the otherwise multi-layered identity of a teacher, namely professional expert's identity and professional teacher's identity.

It is also possible to define a link to the educational policy applied in individual countries and the response of teachers to changes in educational policy, which are manifested in their involvement or distancing from the implemented changes, in connection with the issue of forming the complex identity of VET teachers. In this sense, it is not only the case of identity of VET teachers, but it becomes the agency of VET teachers (Vähäsantanen, 2015). In the Czech Republic, due to the implementation of the educational policy strategy, it is assumed that teachers will be proactively involved in influencing the education process, as actors of educational policy. At the very least, they will do so at the level of individual schools, when it is these schools, where teachers formulate the school education program based on the requirements of the framework education program. Therefore, the teachers will contribute to the transformation of the framework education program according to the personnel and material possibilities of individual schools to the school education program. In this context, the issue of the identity of VET teachers extends to the educational policy management at the school level and subsequently to the management of the education process and potentially also the management of the school itself.

Changes towards efforts to increase the qualification of VET teachers are appreciable, but they do not correspond to the acute need to acquire new VET teachers, especially young ones. If university education is

required as a prerequisite for the possibility of pedagogic studies of VET teachers, this discourages many interested applicants and clearly extends the length of training for future VET teachers. Moreover, in the light of the upcoming reform of education at secondary vocational schools in Czech Republic the requirement for a university qualification in the field of expertise for VET teachers appears to be an unsystematic step. Part of the upcoming reform is an increased emphasis on the practical training of future secondary school graduates, either through at least partial contact with real practice in individual fields of expertise in the form of excursions, when usual preparation takes place in a school environment, or the possibility of introducing a dual system of education, when the dominant practical training takes place in the real conditions of economic practice. The future VET teachers are supposed to acquire relevant professional experience already during their secondary vocational education or better by practical experience in entrepreneurial practice. VET teachers thus need rather specific branch didactic or pedagogical knowledge to be able to mediate the expertise to the pupils. This should be the main interest of management of secondary vocational schools and the Ministry of Education. This type of didactical and pedagogical education could be provided by a lot of institutions, and there is interest for such education among the future VET teachers as well (Adamec & Janderková, 2021; Adamec & Šimáně, 2021).

6. Conclusion

The VET teachers are an important part of the education system in every country. Their position is also specific due to the focus of vocational education in connection with the preparation of future workers for the needs of the labour market, with adequate competences to be applied in this labour market. VET teachers are usually people with significant previous practical experience, and they also use those abilities in their teaching profession. They therefore have a significantly developed original professional expert's identity. Now, when they become VET teachers, they can use this identity, and the competences associated with it, for the successful teaching and administration of the education process. The second component of their identity, i.e., professional teacher's identity, is formed depending on the path of acquiring the professional identity of VET teachers. This can lead through university studies, additional or further studies, or through direct teaching practice. Whatever this path may be, its purpose is development in the field of general pedagogical and didactic competences. In the area of intertwining of both identities, i.e., intertwining of professional expert's identity and professional teacher's identity, the development of general and specific field-specific didactic competences takes place. All these competences are important for the profession of VET teachers. The acquired competences are more important than the pathways that led to them. Also, the complex identity of VET teachers, the professional expert's identity together with the professional teacher's identity and intertwining of them is more important than the pathways leading to the identity of VET teacher. Even if efforts to increase the quality of vocational education not only in the Czech Republic focus, among other things, on increasing the expertise of VET teachers, it is not entirely important whether future VET teachers achieve the development of their professional expert's identity through university education, or only through secondary school education, or through activities in practice.

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