Professional Identity: Becoming and Being a Vocational Teacher

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Teacher professional identity

(Vähäsantanen, 2022)

Life-history based perception of oneself as a teacher in a temporal continuum:

- Professional commitments, interests, and missions.

- Professional values and ethical commitments; perceptions of teaching.

- Understanding of professional knowledge and skills.

- Belonging and identifications to a profession/other teachers.

- Future goals, orientations and plans as a teacher.

Who am I based on my history, where do I belong, what is my current mission and passion at work, and what are my professional goals for the future?

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*A deep understanding of teachers'
professional identity helps us to better
understand their work,
to support their wellbeing,
to train them for the future of VET, and
to inspire people to become interested in and
committed to teaching.*

My academic identity pathway

- The effectiveness of professional teacher education (Master's thesis, 2004).

- Vocational teachers' professional agency and identity in the stream of educational change (Doctoral thesis, 2013).

- Vocational education and teachers (HAMK, 2022->).

Professional learning, identity and agency; Emotions and wellbeing; Educational leadership

Today's story

Introduction:
Current work of vocational teacher and the need for their professional identity work

Professional identity through diverse lenses:
Becoming, being, knowing and belonging

Practical recommendations and research avenues:
Identity-based pedagogy and leadership

Changing work and identity work of teachers

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Changing work of VET teachers

- Digitalised work practices and technology-enhanced learning environments.

- More heterogeneous student groups (e.g. students with migrant backgrounds, special needs, older age, and threatened well-being).

- Increased collaboration with workplaces, different professionals and stakeholders.

- Greater emphasis on educating active citizens and promoting students' integration in society.

- Negotiating and multitasking with different and novel roles in their work.

- Need for agentic orientation to one's own work and competence development.

A work-related change is always a question of teacher identity, not just a cognitive and action-based process of engagement.

Each change calls professional identity work.

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Professional identity work

- **Professional identity work is an agentic and individual process in which** a teacher makes sense of, reflect and work on one's professional identity (e.g. commitments, values, and missions), and negotiates a meaningful balance between that identity and their work.

- **Identity work can lead to a novel, changed or strengthened identity** – Identity work is not always about identity change.

- **A clear and strong core identity protects us amid work-related challenges**.

(Vähäsantanen, 2022)

Becoming a vocational teacher

Motivations to become a vocational teacher

Finnish VET (student) teachers (Silmu, 2024)

1. Intrinsic career value (M=5.95)

2. Work with adolescents / adults (5.77)

3. Teaching abilities (5.62)

Bottom 3: Make social contribution (4.67), Time for family (3.51), Fallback career (2.28)

One interesting notion: Enhancing social equity (5.22) lower than Finnish university student teachers (5.67).

Swedish VET teachers (Kristmansson & Fjellström, 2022)

1. Intrinsic career value (M=5.98)

2. Work with adol. (5.65)

3. Shape future of adol./Make social contribution (5.64)

Bottom 3: Job security (4.31), Social influences (4.06), Time for family (3.69)

(FIT-Choice instrument, Response scale: 1…7)

Motivations to become a teacher matter for

- Professional development and learning.

- Commitment to profession.

- Wellbeing and satisfaction at work.

- Progression in and graduation from teacher education programs.

- Approaches to learning during training.

(see Goller et al., 2019)

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Learning to be a VET teacher

- **Becoming a class teacher** is a complex and multi-faceted process associated with **building a realistic teacher identity** in relation to teaching context. Professional identity work is seen as unique and continuous process of reconciling the personal and contextual (Schellings et al., 2023).

- **Becoming a VET teacher is even a more complex and tensioned process;** the construction of a teacher identity occurs in relation to an occupational identity **(a dual identity process)**.

- **There is often a "boundary crossing" and balancing associated with the creation of a new identity, or problems with the loss of the original identity** (Fejes & Köpsen, 2014; Marinič, 2023).

Identity pathways through teacher education

- VET student teachers have different identity positions at the start of education; *some more oriented towards pedagogy and others towards their own professional field.*

- Professional Identity positions also vary at the end of the training.

- **Identity positions at the start of teacher education are relevant to individual learning pathways** (Vilppola et al., 2023).

Identity at the start of training	Identity at the end of training
"Craft field" identity ($n = 5$)	Identity as reflective pedagogical actor ($n = 4$)
	Enriched stable pedagogical identity ($n = 1$)
"Calling" identity ($n = 4$)	Identity as reflective pedagogical actor ($n = 3$)
	Enriched stable pedagogical identity ($n = 1$)
"Drifter" identity ($n = 4$)	Identity formed by pedagogized craft field ($n = 2$)
	Identity as reflective pedagogical actor ($n = 1$)
	Enriched stable pedagogical identity ($n = 1$)
"Backup" identity ($n = 2$)	Strengthened craft-field identity ($n = 2$)

Professional/VET teacher education

- Important to recognize student teachers' motivations to become a teacher and initial identity positions.

- Providing individual support during training: 'Feeding' motivations and 'redirecting' motivations.

- To support student teachers in developing their (new) professional identity in order to become the teacher they realistically want to be and act as.

- Supporting identity work through narrative diaries, sharing experiences and providing reflection surface.

Becoming a teacher is a life-long and relational learning process.

Being a vocational teacher

VET teachers' identity and relational work

Caretaker / Educator of human beings

Psychology / Social worker

Firefighter

Supporter for students' vocational development

Technology-oriented, online teacher

Innovator of educational practices

Developer of workplaces, networker

Language teacher

- **Teachers' different identity positions** (e.g. Barak & Shoshana, 2022; Köpsen, 2014; Mårtensson et al., 2019; Sirk, 2024).

- **Tensioned or balanced relationships between identity and work** (Vähäsantanen & Hämäläinen, 2019).

  - The most **tensioned** relationship with educating students: Frustrating and limiting the meaningfulness of the work.

  - The most **balanced** identity relationship with vocational teaching at school: Perceived as core work and rewarding.

  - The most **mixed identity** relationship with technology-oriented work.

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VET teachers' professional agency

- **The reciprocal relationship between professional identity and agency** (e.g. actions to influence at work, develop pedagogical practices, and to be societal contributor).

  - **Identity determines how teachers act in work-life collaboration:** Are they passive supporters of student learning or do they actively develop work-life activities? (Vähäsantanen, 2015).

- **Role of other individual and sociocultural features for professional agency** (e.g. competence, career stage, emotional relationships, school leadership; Goodson & Ümarik, M., 2019; Vähäsantanen, 2015).

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Research on the professional agency of VET teachers has been at the margins. Teacher agency in other educational contexts is seen as at the heart of the teacher's work, meaningful and affecting students' learning, well-being and integration into society; the development of schools, and teachers' learning and collaboration.

There are several theoretical approaches and research instruments related to professional agency that could be used to explore the work of vocational teachers.

Satisfaction and perceptions of teaching
(scale:1…7)

Finnish VET (student) teachers (Silmu, 2024):

- Satisfaction with choice to become a teacher (M=5.84)

- Perceptions about teaching:

  - Expert career (M= 5.80)

  - High demand (M= 5.24)

  - Social status (M= 4.51)

  - Good salary (M= 4.24)

Swedish VET teachers (Kristmansson & Fjellström, 2022):

- Satisfaction with choice to become a teacher (M=6.26)

- Perceptions about teaching:

  - Expert career (M= 5.60)

  - High demand (M= 5.43)

  - Social status (M= 3.97)

  - Good salary (M= 3.61)

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Commitment to teaching among VET teachers

- **Motivations to become a teacher and perceptions of teaching are closely related to professional commitment.**

- The work environment and opportunities to enact one's professional identity are crucial for professional commitment; **the relationship between the professional identity and context** (e.g. Vähäsantanen & Billett, 2008; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto, 2011)**.**

Knowing as a vocational teacher

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# VET teachers' competences

- **Comprehensive picture of competences** (Tapani & Salonen, 2019): **i)** Scholarship in teaching and learning relating to pedagogy, guidance and counselling, and interaction, **ii)** Scholarship in authentic learning and development referring to pedagogical leadership, partnership and innovator competency, and **iii)** Scholarship in evaluation and assessment.

- **Boundary-crossing activities and field-specific competence** (Andersson & Köpsen, 2017; 2019).

- **ICT competences** (e.g. digital learning environments and interaction) **and key factors** (e.g. leadership practices, training interventions and one's own activeness) **in their development during teacher education** (Vilppola et al., 2022).

- **Competences situated in the action and practice,** and related to vocational teaching, vocational competence and interpersonal competences (e.g. Antera, 2022).

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Future competence research and development

It is not enough to list competences; **more knowledge on how relevant and important the different competences are for the teacher, how competences are used in the practices of teachers and how their development is supported in teacher education and work.**

- Survey on achievement and importance level of competence (Antera et al., 2022).

- Research and emphasis on supportive mechanisms in **individual and collective competence development**.
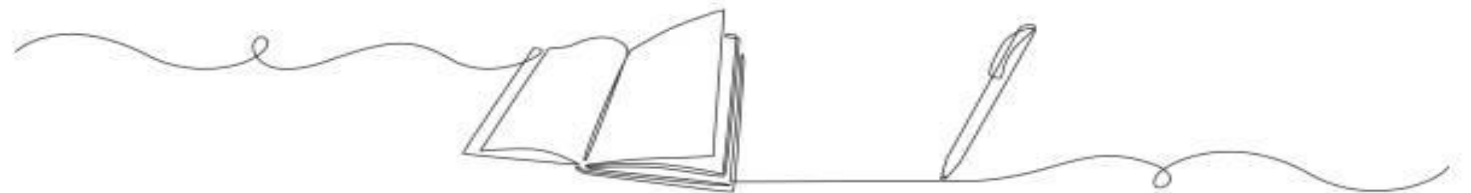
Identity perspective on competence

- **In terms of professional identity work, it is essential to identify** one's strengths and weaknesses in the areas of competence, and one's development paths from a future perspective.

- **Professional identity guides the development of professional competences.**

- **Teachers' identity work is grounded in competences** (Antera & Teräs, 2024), including:

  - *Finding one's teaching self* – the individuals beoame aware of their interest in teaching by discovering that they have already achieved some sort of teaching-related competence.

  - *Connecting professional identities* – the individuals find common competence between their previous occupation and the teaching role.

Belonging as a vocational teacher

Towards collective (teacher) identity

- Teaching still has a strong emphasis on individuality and autonomy; individual identities.

- Narrow and individual identities and job descriptions, plus strong agency can become barriers to collaboration with different students and professional groups inside and outside the school.

  ➤ Important to address more collective identity and promote its development.

Collective teacher identity

'Who are we together as professionals?'

- The memberships, the mutual identifications and attachments, the group affinities and commitments that bind individuals together as a professional group.

- Shared professional commitments, values and missions.

- The extent to which professionals see themselves as a valued professional group.

Why collective identity?

- Makes collaboration and multi-professional work easier and more functional, plus empowering.

- Creates a foundation for shared teaching, influencing and developmental activities.

- Is a basis for work culture where you can fail and learn, ask for help and provide information and feedback.

(Davey, 2013; Hökkä et al., 2017)

Reflections on collective identity

- **How do we work?** (tactical orientation)

- **What we do?** (societal orientation)

- **Why we do it?** (ethical orientation)

- **Who are we as teachers?** (personal orientation)

(Räsänen & Trux, 2012)

Social networks, collective identity and agency

- A limited understanding of vocational teachers' collaborative relationships inside and outside the school through lenses of professional identity, competence and agency.

- Teacher's professional and relational agency in social networks (e.g. Pantic et al., 2024) – how teachers act (*in terms of making decisions, developing operations at workplaces, asking/receiving emotional support*) and why *(e.g. role of identity and competences)*?

Professional identity pedagogy and leadership

Support for professional identity work

- Professional identity covers the individual and collective aspects, and a temporal aspect (past, present, future).

- Professional identity work is a relational, agentic and emotional process – meaningful/necessary for both novice and experienced teachers.

- Professional identity work is an ongoing process that needs time, space and support (mentoring, coaching, training).
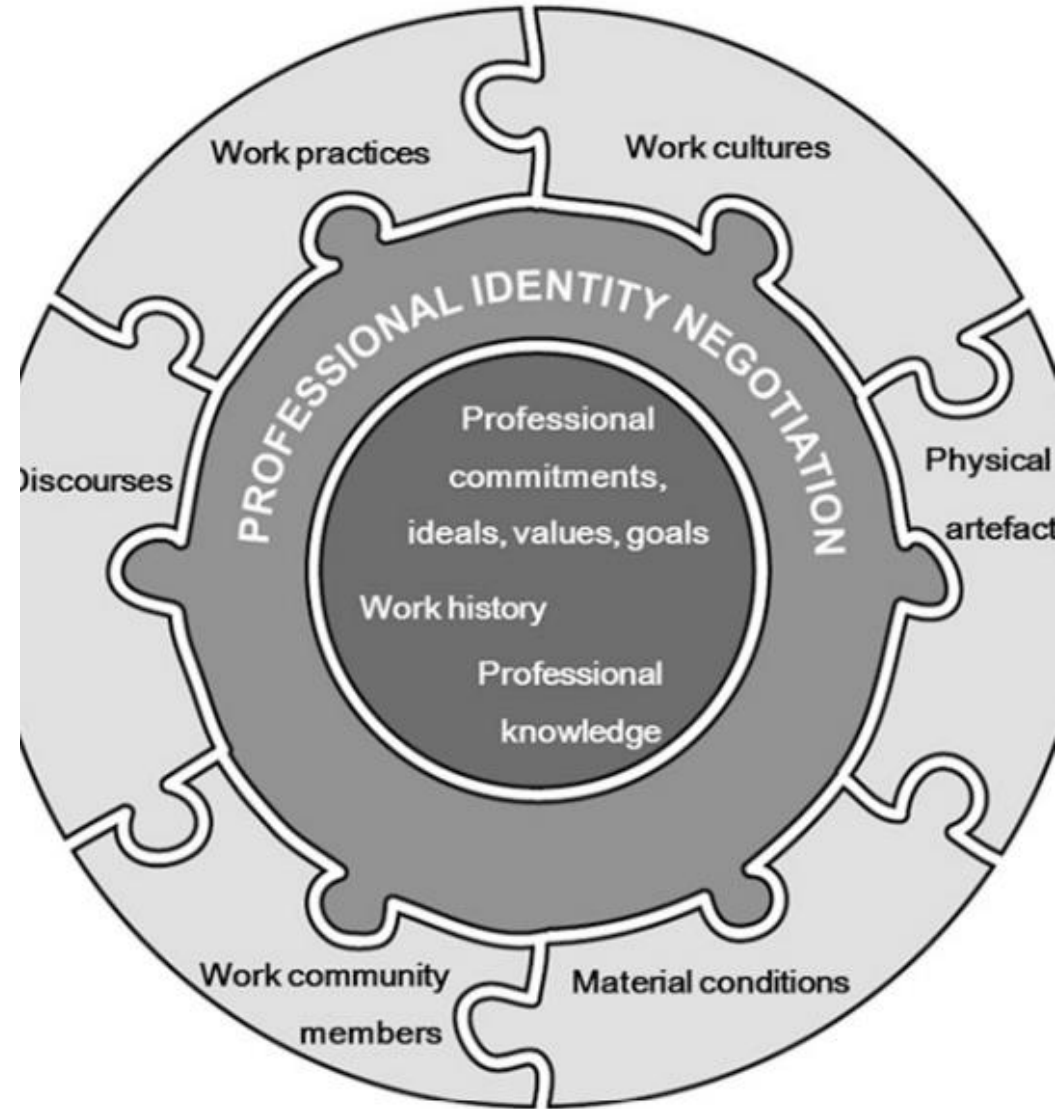
(Figure, Eteläpelto et al., 2014)

Writing stories about becoming teacher through the teacher education (Vilppola, 2023).
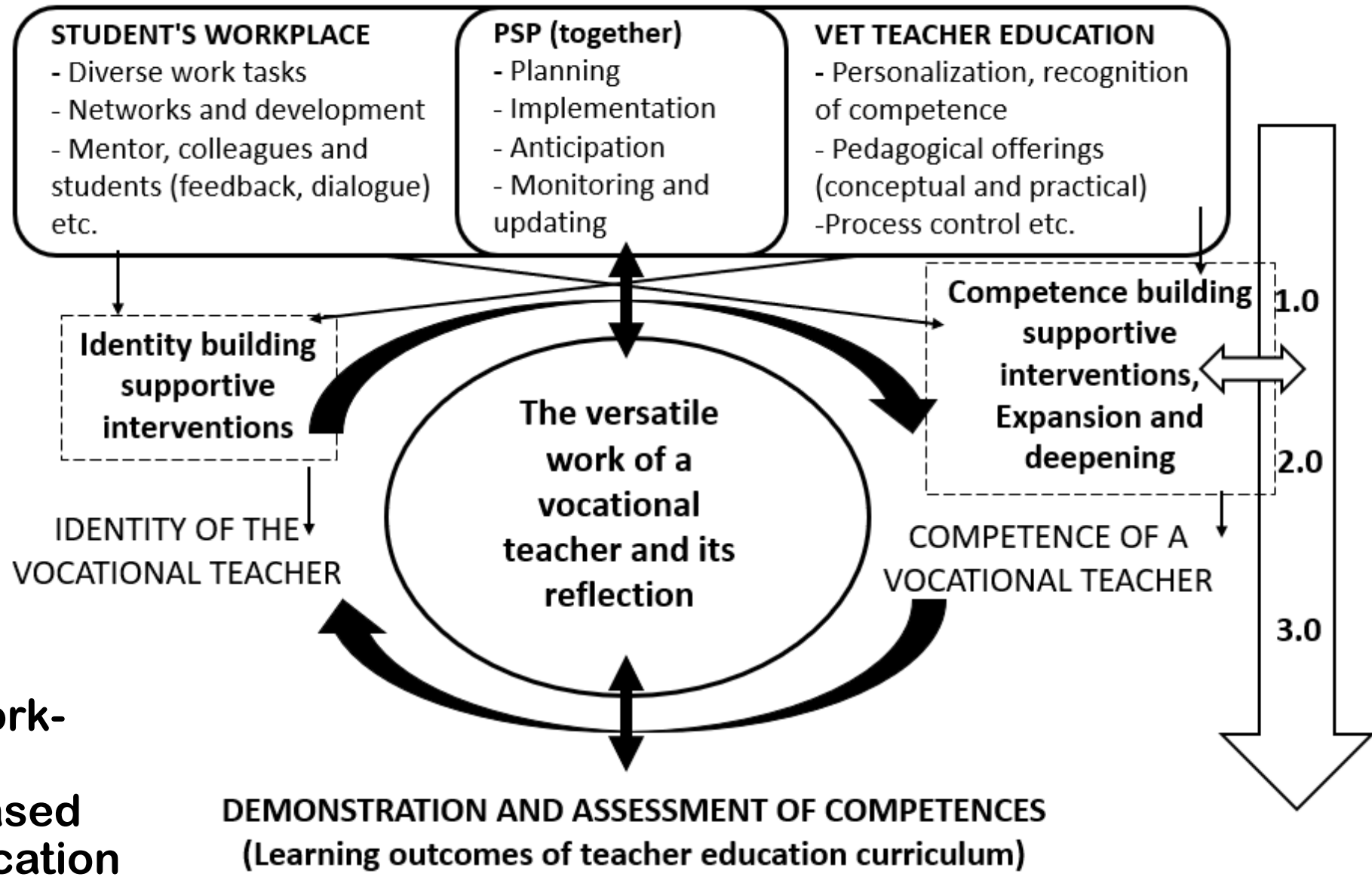
Doing professional identity exercises via writing, e.g. recognising one's identity tensions, reflecting professional growth and challenging situations at work (Schellings et al., 2023)

Arts-based identity work – Professional body

- **The body is drawn creatively on paper**:

  - Professional history: meaningful experiences.

  - Competences: strengths, weaknesses.

  - Professional philosophy: mission, ethical values.

  - Professional development: goals, dreams, minefields

- **A guided and social arena for embodied identity work.**

(Vähäsantanen et al., 2020)

STUDENT'S WORKPLACE
- Diverse work tasks
- Networks and development
- Mentor, colleagues and students (feedback, dialogue) etc.

PSP (together)
- Planning
- Implementation
- Anticipation
- Monitoring and updating

VET TEACHER EDUCATION
- Personalization, recognition of competence
- Pedagogical offerings (conceptual and practical)
- Process control etc.

Identity building supportive interventions

Competence building supportive interventions, Expansion and deepening

1.0

2.0

3.0

The versatile work of a vocational teacher and its reflection

IDENTITY OF THE VOCATIONAL TEACHER

COMPETENCE OF A VOCATIONAL TEACHER

A model for work-based and competency-based VET teacher education
(Vilppola, 2023)

DEMONSTRATION AND ASSESSMENT OF COMPETENCES
(Learning outcomes of teacher education curriculum)

Identity-related leadership

- Encounter people and allow different identities to be seen and heard.

- Provide opportunities for teachers to work with their identities and be an active influencer in the school, rather than being at the mercy of change.

Future research avenues

- **Vocational teachers.**

- Professional agency and social networks.

- Comparative and longitudinal research on becoming and being a teacher (e.g. FIT-Choice, identity positions).

- Emotional identity tensions/pathways during and after teacher education.

- Comparative and multi-method research on professional competences, including the relevance and support of competences at work.

Professional identity, with its goals and dreams for one's work and career, is an individual's compass for navigating one's work; meeting and working with others and making work-related decisions and choices.

Teaching, training, counselling and leading others always involves both one's own professional identity work and supporting the identity work of others, such as students.
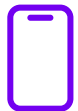
Thank you, kiitos!

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