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Emphasising Self-Directed Learning in VET-Schools: Teachers' Convictions and Role Negotiations

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Abstract

Context: Accompanying learners in their increasingly self-directed learning is an important goal in the field of vocational education and training. With digitalisation, the traditional role of the teacher, characterized in terms of an arbiter and transmitter of knowledge, is in crisis. Besides teachers' task in instruction, other role aspects are coming to the fore, such as supporting learners in their self-directed learning. Words such as *coach*, *mentor*, and *learning* facilitator emphasize mentoring as a key component of the teacher's role, but these are challenging to implement in practice.

Method: The study used in-depth interviews with 10 vocational teachers who emphasise self-directed learning in their lessons. Based on Schütze's narrative analysis method, the narratives revealed how the teachers described typical experiences in relation to their role conception and their role action.

Findings: For the conception and role implementation of coaching roles, the teachers' convictions of what constitutes good learning and teaching were decisive. Training in teacher-training colleges seems to broaden and shift the understanding of teaching and learning processes and progressive roles. Teachers often experience that learners spontaneously reject

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their progressive roles, with learners appearing to prefer traditional teaching and role design. Although their new roles are not yet fully manifested and normalised in their teaching practice, teachers need to repeatedly legitimize the benefits of their role implementation to different stakeholders. Furthermore, difficulties arise in the practical implementation of the roles, since how to act as a teacher in various instructional sequences that emphasise self-directed learning often seems ambiguous.

Conclusion: The teacher's role is in flux, and with changing expectations come challenges in understanding and fulfilling their role. The study results show typical experiences and negotiations of vocational teachers who emphasise self-directed learning in their lessons. The themes derived from the vocational teachers' narrations shed important insights into role negotiation, and the findings may offer direction in how to support and guide teachers in their role implementation.

Keywords: Self-Directed Learning, Vocational Teachers, Institutional Role, Mentoring, Coaching, VET, Vocational Education and Training

1 Introduction

Technological, economic, and social changes in society have shifted the power dynamics between traditional and new information sources (Habermas, 2022). In particular, social media platforms have become forums for people to inform and express themselves (Newman et al., 2023). The impact of the diversification of information power relations on teachers' role has gained scholarly interest: Teachers need to navigate and adapt their roles in the face of new media sources, which are becoming dominant channels for information and knowledge transfer, empowering students to be more self-directed and autonomous in their learning (e.g., Felix, 2020; Scheel et al., 2022). In the digitalized world of work, in which knowledge resources are largely available online, there is a need for employees who can acquire this knowledge independently and continuously while working (Dehnbostel, 2020; Vilpolla et al., 2022). With digitalisation, the traditional role of the teacher, characterized in terms of an arbiter and transmitter of knowledge, is in crisis (Gössling & Sloane, 2020). In addition to the aspect of instruction, other role aspects of the teacher's role are coming to the fore. One important task is to support learners in their increasingly self-directed learning. Words such as *coach*, *mentor*, and *learning facilitator* emphasize mentoring as key components of teachers' roles (de Bruijn & Leeman, 2011; Ketelaar et al., 2012; Tapani & Salonen, 2019).

Although the discourse on self-directed learning and an increasing importance of mentoring aspects of the teacher's role is not new in the field of vocational education and training (Morris, 2019), roles such as learning facilitator or coach are challenging to implement in

practice. For example, de Bruijn and Leeman (2011, p. 700) claimed that "powerful learning environments" lacked genuine self-directed learning and lean toward teacher control. Beckers et al. (2019) investigated the impact of teachers using an e-learning portfolio that supports students' self-directed learning and found that despite teachers' support of self-directed learning tasks provided by the portfolio, there was minimal coaching done. Jossberger et al. (2017) found that even in simulations of work environments in vocational schools, self-directed learning was minimal and called for more tailored didactic approaches.

This article aims to better illuminate the teacher's role in students' self-directed learning in vocational schools.¹ There are often divergent expectations of the teacher's role and the teacher's role is conceptualised as one in transition. Therefore, an interview study inductively elaborates on role conceptions and role enactments of vocational teachers who emphasize self-directed learning in their teaching. Using Schütze's (2016) narrative analysis method, the qualitative interviews with 10 vocational teachers revealed their typical experiences in relation to their role conception and role action. These experiences are further discussed within the context of change.

2 Role Conception and Enactment in the Context of Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning is a crucial concept in vocational education and training in today's increasingly complex and unpredictable world as it enables individuals to adapt to changing circumstances (Morris, 2019). According to Knowles (1975), self-directed learning broadly refers to:

A process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. (Knowles, 1975, p. 18)

With digitalisation, learners assuming more responsibility for their own learning as well as skills in the area of self-direction are becoming more important (Felix, 2020; Scheel et al., 2022). On the one hand, digital technologies are promising to support learners in their self-directed learning, especially due to the simplified information retrieval (Morris & Rohs, 2023). On the other hand, in digital work it is crucial to be able to learn in a self-directed manner, especially in professional fields that are characterised by rapid innovation (Lemmetty & Collin, 2020).

¹ In Switzerland, after compulsory school lasting 11 years, students enroll in either upper-secondary vocational education and training (VET) or in upper-secondary schooling to get admission to universities. Two-thirds of all young people in Switzerland take part in VET programs. Most VET programs consist of part-time classroom instruction (1–2 days a week) at vocational schools combined with part-time apprenticeship at a host company (3–4 days a week). Vocational school teachers teach in the school-based part of VET.

However, what does the increasing importance of self-directed learning mean for the role of teachers? Roles can be seen as largely determined by norms and behavioural expectations and thus as institutionally predetermined (Glade, 2021). According to Dahrendorf (2006), social roles are "bundles of expectations that are attached to the behaviour of the bearers of positions in a given society" (p. 37). In such a lens, the vocational teachers' roles might be what society wants them to be and is thus less subject to individual choice or perception: "A person's roles thus are what her role partners say they are" (Fein, 1990, p. 13). The basic idea is that attributed roles are carried out by individuals in the sense of "role taking" (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2018, p. 389); this means that the actions of individuals are determined by the predetermined role expectations. However, role theories show that the social actors (e.g., the vocational school teachers) themselves are also involved in the formulation and reformulation of their social tasks; they are involved in the production and modification of roles (Turner, 1962). Here, the focus is on the design and construction of roles, which can be described as "role making" (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2018, p. 389). Roles exist in relation to other roles. The interpretation of a role takes place in an interactive and thus reciprocal process in which roles are stabilised and modified (Schulz-Schaeffer, 2018; Turner, 1962). Accordingly, Reay et al. (2017), described that differences in how individuals define themselves in terms of their work might be possible, even in the same institutional context. These individual outcomes of role negotiation processes can eventually lead to new collective role identities (Pouthier et al., 2013). In contrast, a shared stable and inflexible role identity might even hinder innovation and progress (McDonald, 2004). It can be considered important to explore individual role negotiation processes when changing roles are analysed. According to Schulz-Schaeffer (2018), the ideas of role taking and role making are not mutually exclusive but can be seen as two aspects of role action. Individual deviations in role design are all the more possible the less precisely the role is specified and generally accepted, because there is greater room for interpretation. Schulz-Schaeffer (2018) argues that role-taking prevails when role expectations are clear, widely accepted, and actors are both motivated and capable of acting in accordance with these expectations. Conversely, the less these conditions are met and the more actors face role conflicts without institutionalized solutions, the more role-taking transitions to role-making. Norms and perceptions of the teacher role vary greatly, which means that greater individual differences in the implementation of the role can be expected. This is especially important in the Swiss vocational education and training context, because although there are levels of administrative oversight, in Switzerland as in many other countries, vocational teachers have the freedom to choose their own teaching methods (Lloyd & Payne, 2010). The competences to be acquired are laid down in education curricula, but teachers are largely free to choose how they take learners there.

Transferring role theory insights to the current discourse on teachers' roles (in general education and in vocational education), this leads to different, sometimes controversial,

expectations on teaching and learning. For example, Reusser (2000) indicated the difficulty in predicting the future role of teachers, arguing that "educational facilitators, team workers, social pedagogues, knowledge and learning consultants" (p. 85) might replace our traditional understanding of teachers. Scholarly discourse about what the teachers' role is and ought to be is ongoing. According to Terhart (2021), one possibility is that with further digitalisation, the task spectrum of the teacher would be divided: The actual instruction would be taken over by an intelligent teaching system, and aspects such as support, and social embedding would be the responsibility of a new teacher to be designed. There is much controversy about the importance of self-directed learning, and the new conceptualisations and definitions of the teacher role are criticised (Oelkers, 2016). Biesta (2017), for example, argued for a renewed empowerment of the teacher and a strengthening of the teaching role. He criticised that the teacher is increasingly degraded from a "sage on the stage," to a "guide at the side" and eventually to a "peer in the rear" (Terhart, 2018; referring to Biesta, 2017, p. 479).

On the other hand, there is a strong discourse of self-directed learning and an emphasis on mentoring aspects of the teacher's role. To highlight the phenomenon of the facilitative role taken by teachers and the self-directed learning by students, school stakeholders (e.g., in education policy, research, or professional associations) use the term *coach* or *learning facilitator* rather than the traditional term of *teacher*. This is evident in policy papers from the field. For example, a study of educational policy mandates in Austria for the field of vocational schools revealed vocational teachers are described as "designers of instruction (...) who support students' self-directed learning processes, taking on an advisory, coaching, and accompanying role" (Thoma & Hautz, 2018, p. 644). Also, in Swiss educational plans of vocational education, the word *coach* can be found, but concrete ways of acting are implied only (Schweizerische Konferenz der kaufmännischen Ausbildungs- und Prüfungsbranchen, 2014). A more precise definition of what the role of coach entails and to what extent teachers should teach, accompany, and/or coach is often missing. In academic publications, the definitions of what exactly a facilitator or coach does vary, and the terms may not always capture the full range of the teacher's tasks. According to Brauchle (2007), "there is (so far) no adequate term that clearly defines the new role of the pedagogically active person in self-directed learning processes and enjoys broad acceptance" (p. 2).

According to Perkhofer-Czapek and Potzmann (2016), the role of the teacher is changing. There is a shift in the teacher's role from teaching groups of students to guiding individual learners. Teachers today place more emphasis on the accompanying aspects of their role, but other aspects of the teacher's role, such as classroom management and instruction, remain relevant as well.

The teacher's role is in flux, and with changing expectations come challenges in understanding and fulfilling this role. This research study seeks to delve into the challenges that vocational teachers face when searching and enacting a new teaching role. It is relevant to

hear from vocational teachers themselves how they describe their mentoring roles and how those 'roles in transition' might affect role enactment and implementation. The objective is to explore the roles of vocational teachers beyond evaluations or discussions of articulated pedagogical functions and instead inductively capture what experiences are reported by a group of vocational teachers who are considered supporters of self-directed learning. The interviews reveal how teachers perceive their roles and how they negotiate tensions between their ideas, others' expectations, and work practice when enacting their roles.

3 Method

To ascertain what experiences vocational teachers have in the conception and enactment of mentoring roles, this study focuses on vocational teachers who value self-directed learning and teacher support in their teaching. Teachers with more than five years of professional experience were selected for the sample, to interview teachers who had already dealt with their role design in greater depth and who also had experience in the practical implementation of it. Teaching behaviour is often not in line with perceptions about teaching (Yu & Boulton-Lewis, 2008; Zsiga & Webster, 2007). Therefore, the selection process did not allow the interviewees to nominate themselves for the interviews but required nomination by a third party (i.e., professors at teacher-training institutions). This led to the interviewing of vocational teachers who are known to place a high value on self-directed learning and teacher support.

The narrative interviews were conducted with 10 vocational teachers, and the purpose was to use narrative-generating stimuli to encourage the interviewees to talk about their conception of the role of the teacher and the enactment of the role of the teacher. The aim was for the prompts to encourage the interviewees, as much as possible, to speak freely without being swayed by the interviewer's ideas (e.g., when concrete questions about a phenomenon of interest are asked directly, and interviewees simply confirming the interviewer's assumptions and the interviewees respond to the topic area argumentatively). Thus, the mentoring role and its enactment was not directly asked but instead was addressed more generally regarding an understanding of teaching and one's own role within it. Finally, the following narrative stimuli were chosen: (a) Explain how you came to be a vocational teacher, (2) talk about positive and negative aspects of your work, (3) tell how an ordinary teaching day is organised, and (d) reflect on if and how your image of the teacher has changed in the course of your professional activity.

Interviewing was characterised by asking only immanent follow-up questions (i.e., repeating content introduced by the interviewee but not introducing new content). Subsequently, follow-up questions, comprehension questions, or further questions were asked

about narrative stumps (interrupted narratives) that seemed interesting (as explained by Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014).

The interviews lasted between one and three hours. Later, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were analysed according to Schütze's (2016) narrative analysis method. First, the interview texts were formally analysed, and each passage was determined as a narrative passage, a description, or an argumentation. All the interviews were coded accordingly with MAXQDA, and the narratives were classified into a main narrative strand. Narratives are at the centre of a narrative analysis, and narrative segments are usually formulated in the past tense. They are often introduced in a striking way and concluded by a coda in which the narrator linguistically marks that the narration is finished, for example, by an evaluation of what happened (e.g., This was really a remarkable experience for me) or by returning to the initial question or to the narrative stimulus (e.g., I think these are the most important stages of how I became the teacher I am today). On the basis of these narrative segments, which, according to the literature, are close to the actual experience (homology assumption; Schütze, 1981, 1984), characteristic ways for the interviewees to act were worked out.² These characteristic ways of acting could then be contrasted with the argumentative statements. Teachers may represent values and argue on one level regarding their role conception, but how they enact their role may be another matter (Raemy & Vos, 2021). Schütze's method for narrative analysis is suitable for this investigation because foregrounding narratives provides access to teachers' actual experiences. This analytical approach suggests that narratives co-formed by the flow of storytelling are less distorted by social desirability than argumentations and ratings on the interviewer's inputs.

To preserve the narrative character of the interviews, longer quotes are presented in the Findings section. In the evaluation of the interviews, it became clear which experiences the teachers have in role conception and role enactment.

4 Findings: Conception and Enactment of Vocational Teachers' Roles in a Shifting Educational Landscape

The narratives revealed four experiences that were often echoed by many teachers in the sample: (a) A changed conviction of what constitutes good learning and teaching, (b) a changed teacher role calling for a changed learner role, (c) uncertainty due to different expectations of different stakeholders, and (d) role enactment affecting role conception and vice versa. These

² In the present study, the analysis was implemented as follows: For all previously identified narratives, it was determined how the narrator acts in the situations described. As a heuristic instrument, the basic types of action from biographical research were used, as described in Heiser (2018): Biographical patterns of action (narrator acts according to his own biographical goals), progressive curves (narrator loses power to act, the situation slips away from him), institutional framework (narrator relinquishes biographical control to institution), and biographical process of change (narrator gets to know new sides of himself). All narrative sections of interviews showed that although the individual narratives refer to very different situations, the narrator's actions show similarities in their basic structure.

topics might be signs of the typical experiences of teachers who orient on and enact roles related to self-directed learning. These typical experiences, as well as hindering and supporting aspects of role enactment enabling self-directed learning, are presented and discussed in the following sections.

4.1 A Changed Conviction of What Constitutes Good Learning and Teaching

Various narrations illustrated how or when the interviewees began to believe in the benefits of self-directed learning. They further described how their roles have changed and how their new approach to teaching is promoting more effective learning compared to the more traditional way of teaching in front of class. The narrations revealed that teacher-training programmes are conducive to role changes. In such programmes, self-directed learning and the accompanying roles of teachers could be the subject of discussion and training. Furthermore, the interviewed vocational teachers were familiar with the sometimes-controversial discourses regarding their role and thus with the demands to emphasise the self-direction of learning, independent of their training and continuing education. This narration is exemplary:

I was sweating like a bear. I explained things by using models, I simplified information, I tried everything—even methodically—really, I tried everything, and there were still some apprentices who didn't understand it. At a certain point, you might think that they have some cognitive issues or whatever. Again, I did everything I could, and I couldn't do much better. So, I thought the problem must be the learners. Maybe they are a little lazy, in the midst of adolescence. Then suddenly, I started to understand (...). I still went to the teacher-training college, but it was already before that. I heard that a learning process of one person can take up to nine times longer than with another person. It has nothing to do with being smart or stupid but with previous experience and with developing. I explained things and maybe asked a question, and then only those who already knew could answer. The ones who don't know yet just sit there, hoping I will not ask them to give an answer (...). Some always raise their hands. These are the ones who ask questions because they have somewhat the same rhythm as I have. From then on, I said that it must be different. I must find a way to allow the individual learning of these young people to develop. (Interview 3, lines 125–143)

This narration exemplifies how convictions related to roles might change and how this change is often provoked by a certain event or understanding. As de Bruijn and Leeman (2011) stated, one difficulty in implementing new teaching methods is that it takes time for changes to take place and putting theoretical knowledge into practice is generally challenging. In addition, new conceptual ideas are often not sufficiently elaborated and tailored to teachers' practice. The narration exemplifies how, at one point, the teacher began to question long-held beliefs about what good learning and teaching is. According to several interviewees, not only theoretical input but also one's own experience of teaching, usually over longer periods of

time, can be decisive for a change in thinking. They often referred to constructivist teaching-learning theories, emphasising learners' individual learning needs, and teachers' supporting roles. Some interviewees said they started their careers with a more teacher-centred teaching style. They then linked theoretical input with their experiences in practice, tried out new approaches (e.g., after further training), and further developed their teaching based on what they had heard or with the help of further input such as literature they read or inspiration from colleagues. One narration shows how a teacher strengthened changed assumptions and convictions about learning and teaching:

I also required people to keep bringing it to my attention because (...) whenever you get a little bit of pressure again [of newly designed lessons not working out as desired right away] (...) otherwise, you go back to the old patterns. I was strongly supported by a mentor (...). I started reading a lot about constructivism, brain research, complexity research. After that, I began to design my learning process myself. That's the core, noticing myself how I cope with open questions. After that, I talked a lot more about my own learning, also with the apprentices. (Interview 3, lines 144–150)

It seems crucial to have an environment that supports the new role implementation and continues offering encouragements, even when the implementation does not work right away. Regarding teachers' roles in transition, the changes, reinterpretations, and reorientations are important aspects of how roles might change. A narration of another teacher exemplifies this process:

During my training at the teacher-training college, I learned that I am not responsible for the learners' motivation but that the learners themselves are responsible for their motivation. That has been very important for me. I have committed myself much more to it, and then I have learned much more in these years to take myself back. If I do too much, then they can sit back. So, I must be careful that there's no interplay there. My concept of teaching is rather that I make a table and put as many things as possible on it—a little sweet, a little salty, that's how I imagine it, and then I invite them to come to this table and take something. But they must eat it themselves. What I can do is have these things nicely plated or precooked so they can digest them. But they must eat it. That was a key moment. (Interview 2, lines 86–92)

The teacher's role is not changed by external authorities or actors, as in the case of a deliberate redesign of roles (e.g., Reay et al., 2017). Rather, role change occurs at the initiative of the teachers themselves (similar to role change at the initiative of professionals, as described by Goodrick & Reay, 2010). Indeed, the interviewees changed their fundamental conceptions of how teaching and learning can succeed. As a result of Van Maanen and Schein (1979), dissatisfaction with one's role can lead professionals to redefine it by changing the mission associated with the role. In the case of the vocational teachers interviewed, it was not the basic mission that changed, which is "to teach well," but rather the basic conception of how this can be best accomplished.

4.2 A Changed Teacher Role Calls for a Changed Learner Role

The narratives revealed that learners were often unhappy with the teachers' new role designs emphasising self-directed learning. In fact, many teachers reported that learners prefer more traditional instruction, in which the teacher actively presents content and gives instruction to learners. In some cases, teachers report that learners literally demand that the teacher 'teach properly' (Interview 9, line 127).

I set up a learning hub. That's where everyone was invited to get learning advice—'Where do you want to go? What are you trying to do? How are you going to get there?' But they wanted me to set up a task and to tell them how to do it. (Interview 1, lines 362–365)

The statement exemplifies how a lesson design where the teacher tries to take on a mentor role can get rejected. This rejection can trigger uncertainties in teachers' role design. The following interview section demonstrates that when introducing self-directed learning, it can be helpful to specifically discuss with the class how one sees one's role and how one implements it.

In the beginning, when I tried to do self-directed learning times or phases, I always imagined how this would look like for a bystander. If they would just see what I'm doing or what I'm not doing, then they would think that I'm a lazy teacher. It has a lot to do with my role model and understanding of what I feel I should be doing. But my job is not to babble all over the learners. They would just hang out and wouldn't learn, work, or do anything at all. It's important to explain that to the class. Not because the learners were probably thinking that I'm lazy, but because I was really dealing with the internal struggle. I said, 'Look, I'm up front. If you have a question, come up front; I'm here for you, but I want to give you the opportunity to be able to do this.' (Interview 4, lines 412–419)

When teachers assume a changed role, learners may find it challenging because it requires a change in their role as well. If a learning context gives students choices in how they learn, then new competencies are required such as self-discipline to grasp short-term and long-term goals, planning, organising, and selecting. Adapting to these new expectations may not be easy for learners. The narratives illustrate the interconnectedness of roles, whereby role holders realise their respective roles in coordination with one another (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Teachers might define their role identity by reciprocally situating themselves in relation to others through ongoing interactions (Langley et al., 2012). However, changing well-rehearsed roles in highly institutionalised contexts is difficult (Reay et al., 2017) and can lead to uncertainty in terms of specific actions and responsibilities (Machin et al., 2012), as indicated by the narrations.

4.3 Uncertainty Due to Different Expectations of Different Stakeholders

The interviewees reported feeling unsettled by different role expectations of their school and academic environment in their role implementation. This is consistent with Windschitl's (2002) claim that, in addition to conceptual and pedagogical factors, cultural and political factors can also hinder the implementation of new forms of teaching. Although there is a strong discourse toward self-directed learning, ideas vary as to what exactly the learners themselves control during learning and in which areas the teacher should predominantly accompany them. Also, there are controversial views about the importance of self-directed learning through the entire teaching time. According to the interviewees, even in teacher-training institutions, lecturers do not agree on the topic of self-direction of learning. There are different concepts and designations. Contrary to the general trend, some lecturers advocate a more teacher-centred teaching approach and a more traditional implementation of the teacher's role. Because the discourse is also controversial in academia, teachers do not find, either in the scholarly discourse or at their educational institution, a unified prescription of how to implement their role. This conceptualizing of roles in relation to stakeholders was often echoed in the interviews. For example, a statement of a teacher exemplified uncertainty due to holding different ideas about the teacher's role. The teacher created a concept for self-directed learning with some colleagues of the school, which was criticized by a professor at the teacher-training college:

It is interesting (...) our professor, basically, I have the feeling that he is not so enthusiastic about self-directed learning (...) and he's an expert; I think he's very good. The first moment was like, 'Oh shit, he doesn't think it [self-directed learning] is cool.' (...). And we have now also written a paper with him about self-directed learning, and some results have already come out there, where I have to say that we are not doing it so badly after all. It just depends on what you really talk about, on what you mean by self-directed learning and how you implement it. (Interview 5, lines 579–591)

The narration exemplifies the teacher's uncertainty about the contrasting perspective of one's professor. But this uncertainty also triggered the teacher's reflections on what self-directed learning is and what the role of a teacher should look like. Hence, it can be assumed that teachers are strengthened in implementing their progressive role when they develop a common conception within a school team.

According to the experience of the interviewees, the attitude of the school administration seems to be decisive for the extent to which vocational teachers can achieve mentoring roles. The following interview excerpt shows that the support for self-directed learning and the accompanying teacher's role by the school administration cannot be taken for granted. In one department of the interviewee's school, self-directed learning was even prohibited.

And it also needs in any case the acceptance of the school management. I always got the feedback of the school that it [self-directed learning] was okay and that I should try it. If criticism was raised, they would fully hold my back. Because there have been complaints from the apprentices' workplace training companies, they asked: 'What's the point of this?' And there's even been a department of the school where it was forbidden to do self-directed learning because people of a workplace-training company complained that the teacher didn't do anything. But they never came to the school and looked at how it worked. The school administration must stand behind it. (Interview 4, lines 449–454)

According to Nicholson (1984), personal and role-related change and role exploration are possible when individuals have a high degree of freedom in deciding how to shape the role. Institutional factors determine the appropriate freedom (Chreim et al., 2007). In the case of the teachers interviewed, freedom was ambivalent. On one hand, due to the freedom of methods, they are free to determine the teaching methods and can give self-directed learning the importance they want, which in principle favours new forms of implementation. However, there are curricular guidelines that set the basic tone. On the level of the school organisation itself, specifications can be made. It is ideal for the establishment of a new role if the views of several stakeholders on the legitimacy of a new role implementation come together (Chreim et al., 2007). Based on the interviews, however, it can be assumed that attitudes will vary greatly regarding the associated implicit specifications of how the role should be designed, and a controversial picture can emerge overall through different instances. Teachers are then left to negotiate their role for themselves and to repeatedly justify its implementation to others.

4.4 Role Enactment Affecting Role Conception and Vice Versa

The interviewed teachers often seemed uncertain in the implementation and design of their role in practice. There are few models for the behaviour of the vocational teacher in the classroom, where self-directed learning is the focus. Moreover, there seems to be little common sense to fall back on in this area. How one has experienced the teacher's role in the past, or even as a learner, is hardly suitable as an orientation, because teachers want to realise a progressive implementation rather than a traditional one.

The following interview passage demonstrates such uncertainty in practical teaching. The interviewed teacher gave the learners a self-learning task and offered the learners to come forward if they had questions. However, if they did not, he was unsure whether he should continue or interfere in the learning process again and, for example, stimulate the learners to think further by asking triggering questions.

I always try to adopt a bit of a coaching attitude. I try not to impose myself as much as possible. But you still must wake up the students a bit. I'm not doing that very well yet. In the beginning, I sometimes told myself that I would just sit at the teacher's desk and do my thing. If no one comes,

it's okay. But that can lead to maybe sitting there for four hours, and nobody wants anything from me. Then I started to address the learners with triggering questions from time to time. That's where I have a little trouble: How firmly do I take myself back in this self-learning phase? The longer learners know me, the more often they ask. In the beginning, the relationship is not there, and afterwards, it is rather the opposite. There are so many who want to talk to me that there is not enough time. (Interview 9, lines 834–840)

The narration indicates a process of role negotiation (Raemy & Vos, 2021) in which certain changed aspects of a role are enacted, tested, adopted, and reinterpreted. Enacting on a new role is often linked with uncertainty. Many thoughts, ideas, and practices are not yet normalised. Norms are the foundation of roles and are thus important for role manifestation. Therefore, role changes need enactments, reinterpretations, and improvisation that eventually lead to normalisation. The narration shows that teachers need to make an effort to normalise their roles and that hindering factors can be exhausting. When teachers act together in setting guiding principles, they can redefine conceptions (whether or not that would involve roles), especially where there is resistance and ambiguity (Corley & Gioia, 2004). Several interviewees reported that networking with other teachers played a central role in implementing their role. Some interviewees were members of a teacher's association that implemented self-directed learning. The association organises a series of events on self-directed learning, and members visit one another's classrooms. In the context of such networks, open questions that arise in different teaching situations are discussed. The emergence and establishment of new roles requires interaction (Edmondson et al., 2001). It helps teachers to exchange ideas about their roles with others; this allows them to differentiate, consolidate, and normalize their own role models.

5 Conclusion

In today's digital society, the ability to learn autonomously is crucial. The discourse on a shift in the teaching toward a more student-centred approach, where learners take the initiative in directing their education and teachers offer individualized support, is not new in the field of vocational education and training. However, studies indicate that the implementation of self-directed learning and teacher support in the role of a learning facilitator or a coach are challenging.

Through an inductive analysis, this study shed light on the experiences of vocational teachers who have progressively embraced roles that prioritize self-directed learning. Focusing on the perception of role conceptions and the narration of role enactment, four topics might be relevant for discussions and future studies regarding teachers' new roles. First, it is important to understand teachers' convictions of what constitutes good learning and teaching. Training in teacher-training-colleges seemed to broaden and shift their

understanding of teaching and learning processes and the implementation of progressive roles. Second, teachers often experience learners spontaneously rejecting their progressive roles, with learners appearing to prefer traditional teaching and role design. Negotiating the roles of both the teacher and learners may help to strengthen role conception and enactment. Third is the legitimization of vocational teachers' new roles. Even though their new roles are not yet fully manifested and normalised in their teaching practice, teachers need to repeatedly legitimize the benefits of self-directed learning to different stakeholders. Finally, vocational teachers experience uncertainty about how to implement their role in the classroom. There is no general consensus on the progressive design of the role. How to act as a teacher in various instructional sequences that emphasise self-directed learning often seems ambiguous, so role enactment often affects their role conceptions and vice versa. Ideals might be reinterpreted and adapted in relation to practice. The narrations also revealed that exchanges with other teachers orienting to similar roles can help to shape, articulate, and manifest new role designs for different teaching situations. This is in line with role theory in that roles are discursively constructed (Raemy & Vos, 2021) and shared values and beliefs within a community are foundational to a new role.

However, the narratives also exemplified an aspect that has been less discussed in the literature. A role transition might be based on individual experiences; in fact, the teachers often echoed a crucial moment when their conviction about learning and teaching changed. They stated that learning about the possibility of their roles (through professional development programs at teacher-training colleges, for example) helped strengthen their new convictions. Based on their new convictions and knowledge, they started to probe and improvise new teaching and learning approaches. These new experiences of role enactment feed back to their assumptions and role conceptions. The obstacles and hindering factors of their new role enactment seem to not affect their inner convictions but result in amendments of their role conceptions. This is in line with Raemy (2021) and Keiler (2018), who differentiate between professional roles and professional identities, with the latter being more related to stable inner convictions.

The themes derived from the teachers' narrations shed insight into important aspects of role negotiation. The findings provide possible indicators of how to support and guide teachers in their role implementation. Furthermore, the typical experiences discussed could be further scrutinised in the context of role change theories in general. Focusing on experiences in implementing professional roles, facilitated by the analysis of the narrative passages, might contribute positively to the discourse and analysis of changing roles, not only in education but also in other professional fields. Future studies could use other methods, such as observation, to explore more in-depth teachers' actual, practised role enactment.

Ethics Statement

Our research complies with ethical guidelines and adheres to Swiss legal requirements. We adhere to the Swiss-academies Code of Conduct for Scientific Integrity. As this is not required in Switzerland, no approval was obtained from an independent ethics committee for this research. In the research, all participants gave their consent for us to use the material for publication. The interview data was anonymised and is only quoted in excerpts, so that it is not possible to draw conclusions about the identity of the interviewees.

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