

## Ideal Teacherhood in Vocational Education

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### Authors' contributions

*This work was carried out in collaboration between all authors. Author AKH performed the empirical part of the study. Analyses and conclusions were drawn in collaboration between the research collaboration group. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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### ABSTRACT

**Aims:** Ideal teacherhood in vocational education has not been widely studied or comprehensively defined. However, in the changing work life, the role of vocational education teachers (VET) becomes more and more important as they are responsible for educating future employees in numerous professional fields. What does ideal teacherhood consist of in vocational education?

**Study Design:** The narrative research approach was chosen to study VETs' perceptions of ideal teacherhood in vocational education.

**Methodology:** In this study, twelve Finnish VETs were recruited from one vocational education college with multiple fields. The data obtained included oral (N=5) and written (N=7) narratives.

**Results:** According to the results, the conception of ideal teacherhood turned into a more realistic one as the VETs' work experience increased.

**Conclusion:** Ideal teacherhood in vocational education occurred in the VETs' descriptions through six features of which three are connected with VETs' professional self and three with personal self. Ideal teacherhood in vocational education can be found in the confluence of these two areas of VET identity.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The core goal of vocational education is to provide vocational education students with good professional expertise. Vocational education teachers (VET) introduce necessary skills and knowledge to be learned in a form that students can learn and practice [1]. These skills and knowledge support their learning processes and motivate them to enter work life. VETs are expected to create quality learning environments and guarantee excellent learning results. In addition, VETs have to update their knowledge and skills constantly as well as to renew professionally, personally, and communally. VETs interact not only with diverse students but also with other personnel and rapidly changing work life. Along with these goals, it is possible to refer to the ideal teaching in vocational education and to the concept of a good teacher. Uusiautti and Määttä [2] state that it is not possible to define strictly the criterion of a good teacher—ideal teacherhood in this case—but a teacher is always a unique personality. Personality is a teacher's essential tool [2], which means that development toward ideal teacherhood mean somewhat the same as development toward a good personality [3].

Notwithstanding, it has been questioned whether the essence of good teacherhood can be even defined [4]. Conceptions are contradictory [5,6], nor is it always that straightforward to list the factors of good teacherhood [2,7].

Still, attempts to create definitions of good or ideal teacherhood are abundant. Teachers' continuous and determined self-development and commitment to the personal and professional growth make the prerequisites for the development of good personality [1,8]. Renewal and personal growth necessitate also redefinitions of one's professional identity including reflection of one's self at work and in free time as well as evaluation of one's values, dreams, and commitments [9]. Resulting positive conception of oneself as a skillful expert and developing individual lays the foundation of a good professional identity [10,11,12]. Likewise, the definition of good teacherhood is necessary in vocational education. Next we will discuss the challenges of and possible outlines of such a definition. The purpose is to analyze how VETs

themselves perceive ideal teacherhood in vocational education.

## 2. THE DIFFICULTY OF DEFINING IDEAL TEACHERHOOD IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Constant change is an essential part of VETs' work. Because of this, the definition of ideal teacherhood in vocational education seems unreachable. In Finland, the reform of curricula in vocational education brought new challenges in VET's work [13]. Likewise, new conceptions of learning, more and more diverse student groups, and new teaching arrangements have changed VET qualifications [14]. Students are still seen as the core of VET's work, but instead of education and teaching, current conception of learning emphasize more guidance of learning and learning processes [15,16].

Various organs of society target expectations and pressure to teachers' work. Teachers should be simultaneously supporters of holistic psychological and physical development, collaborators who are equipped with exquisite interaction skills, users of the latest technological innovations and social media who can renew their teaching and search actively new information, as well as, first and foremost, societal contributors and activists [17].

VETs have to enhance students learning processes by organizing various learning situations in diversified and updated learning environments that resemble actual work situations, methods, and places. Almost every student group includes students with special needs, which means that teachers must be able to design individualized study paths for each student [18]. Work with students with profound and multiple learning difficulties reflects on teachers' professional identities as well [19]. VETs are expected to be familiar with the latest societal and work-life changes and the related influence on qualification requirements. A teacher's role in relation to students involves more than ever education about the roles of society and guidance of study processes [20,21,22].

Along with new learning environments arrangements of workplace learning periods necessitates that VETs possess specific

familiarity with society, work life, and business life as well as active and developmental cooperation with these instances [23,24,25]. Multiprofessional cooperation also makes a more salient part of VETs' work [26]. Due to VETs' multisided work description, the limits of a teacher's role have been questioned: "When is a teacher not a teacher?" [27]. Where are the limits of a teacher's qualifications is an essential question when defining ideal teacherhood and reflecting on its relationship with the reality of teaching in practice. VETs' work can include the requirement of ideal activity and ideal teacherhood [28].

Ideal teacherhood has been greatly studied in the light of different students' opinions [29,30,31,32]. For example, student teachers have been asked to compare themselves with their conception of ideal teacherhood [33]. Indeed, differences between students' and teachers' opinions have raised interest already for a long time [34], and there are studies analyzing how concepts of "ideal student" and "ideal teacher" are connected to each other [35], how ideal teacherhood contributes to teacher effectiveness [36], and the relationship between teachers and students [37].

However, ideal teacherhood in vocational education has not been widely studied. This study aimed to contribute to this gap in knowledge. We wanted to analyze what ideal teacherhood consists of in vocational education in the first place according to VETs' perceptions. This viewpoint was chosen because VETs' own conceptions have not been profoundly analyzed thus far.

### 3. VOCATIONAL EDUCATION TEACHER'S IDENTITY

Ideal teacherhood in vocational education is connected with a teacher's identity. Our previous study analyzed VET's identity [38] revealing that it consists of four areas:

- (1) Substance knowledge, including the know-how of VET's professional field, professional expertise, and work-specific skills.

Teachers are traditionally perceived as subject matter experts. Knowledge of subject matter has always been the core feature of a good teacher [39]. However, instead of distribution of

information, today's teachers are merely expected to handle transmission of knowledge. Moreover, evaluation of information and skills is important in these days. In addition, professional expertise has to be updated constantly, and the readiness to professional change and development has to be provided already in vocational basic education.

- (2) Pedagogical expertise, including the ability to lead teaching, learning, and study processes, organize and analyze teaching situations, and encounter and guide students.

Although technology and teaching methods develop all the time, teachers' personal inputs still matter. It is especially apparent in the pedagogical, ethical, and moral dimensions of teaching. Pedagogical expertise is a combination of many knowledge and skills related to student interaction and how they are applied in the practical complexity of teaching situations [2].

- (3) Work-life skills, including co-operation skills, willingness to create networks, ability to work in various teams, and economic and administration skills.

VETs work in collaboration with colleagues in the college and with employers and other representatives of the professional field. VETs function as mediators between vocational education students and work-life professionals.

- (4) Developmental abilities, ability and will to develop one's mastery over the knowledge and skills in one's vocational field, participate in the development of one's field and work life, and trust in the progress of vocational development through teaching and learning processes.

Due to the professional change and variation, VETs are required to possess such knowledge and teaching skills that helps vocational education students adjust to the day's professional expectations. VETs are expected to work for and influence the appreciation of their vocational field.

The classification of professional identity in many ways reminds earlier illustrations of a teacher's professional identity [40,41,42,43,44]. Our research was focused on less studied teachers: VETs' perceptions have not been studied much

compared to, for example, elementary school teachers. However, their work differs greatly from other teachers' work.

In this study, we continue our analysis of VETs' perceptions of their work. The focus is especially on their ideas about ideal teacherhood and its connection with professional identity.

#### 4. METHODS

The purpose of this study is to describe VETs' understanding about ideal teacherhood in vocational education. At the same time, the goal is to analyze how VETs try to develop professionally and how ideal teacherhood is connected with professional identity. The following research questions were set for this study:

- (1) How does ideal teacherhood in vocational education appear according to VETs' descriptions?
- (2) How is ideal teacherhood in vocational education connected to professional identity according to VETs' perceptions?

In this study, twelve Finnish VETs were recruited from one vocational education college with multiple fields. The request to participate in the study were sent to all 28 VETs in this college. The teachers had the following questions to help them to create their narratives: (1) How long you have worked as a VET and how old are you now?; (2) How did you end up in a VET's profession?; (3) How did you develop as a VET of this kind that you are today?; (4) What were you like at the beginning of your career and how are you today as a teacher?; (5) What kind of a teacher would you like to become?; and (6) What would you like to achieve in your teacher's career?

The teachers were asked to either write their narratives or record them with a digital recorder that the researcher would transcribe afterwards. The data obtained included oral (N=5) and written (N=7) narratives. The narrative research approach was chosen to study VETs' perceptions of ideal teacherhood in vocational education. The approach was considered suitable because of its context-bound, personal, and subjective nature. In this kind of research, the power is given from the researcher to the research participant [45]. The narrative research

approach simply refers to analysis of narratives told by people [46].

The concept of narrative defines narrative analysis [47]. The analysis of narratives means that situations and events, people's characteristics and other elements in narratives are categorized into themes and types. In this study, the purpose was to analyze how ideal teacherhood appears in VETs' narratives and what kinds of themes and types emerge from the data. The narrative analysis pursues constructing a new narrative that is based on the original narrative data [48] – a description of ideal teacherhood in this case. According to Polkinghorne, a result of the narrative analysis is a time-bound, structured, and plotted entity with a conclusion [47]. This kind of meta-narrative reveal various parts of the data and their confluences.

The data analysis was based on the qualitative data, twelve narratives that were categorized with the analysis of narratives and combined as conclusions with the narrative analysis [49]. The analysis of narratives means categorizing based on types, metaphors, or classes [50]. Marjatta Saarnivaara [51] pointed out that, in narrative research, description can be seen as the foundation of the construction of narratives. Description can be widened and specified with analysis. In this study, categorization followed the idea of the analysis of narratives pursuing the identification of key factors and their interconnectedness [49]. In this sense, the analysis was data-based, which means that the themes emerging in the data were analyzed and reduced as the categories introduced as results. According to Jerome Bruner [52], paradigmatic knowledge is typically rigorous and formal, and produces argumentation that follows from logical statements and careful definition of concepts and categories.

In narrative research like this one, the reliability and validity of the data are worth discussing. Transferability criterion refers to sufficient detail of the context and whether the findings can justifiably be applied to the other setting [53]. In this study, VETs presented various occupational fields and therefore, their descriptions of professional identity covered vocational education teacherhood widely. The meeting of the dependability criterion is difficult in qualitative work in general because the research themes and data are often impossible to repeat [53].

Careful description of the select methods and data obtained strengthen the dependability and trustworthiness of the study [53]. The narrative method seemed to suit extremely well to the research on teachers' professional development and identity: teachers create and construct their identities by talking, interpreting, and reflecting their experiences and opinions, which can be seen the foundation of their perceptions of ideal teacherhood as well [54,55].

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1 The Possibility of Ideal Teacherhood

When defining ideal teacherhood in vocational education, VETs answered to the question of what they set their sights on as teachers, what kind of teachers they would like to be, and what is important in teacherhood. Many VETs described their insecurity and mistakes taking place at the beginning of their teacher careers. This has been noted by earlier research as well [56,57,58]. The VETs in this study also talked about their pursuit of being a perfect teacher. VETs reflected on their unrealistic goals quite aptly:

*I made plenty of mistakes. I tried to be a strict, assertive buddy, and this caused the conflicts with the adolescent students... -- You have to be an honest personality (7).*

In general, VETs seemed to become able to reflect on the possibility of reaching ideal teacherhood more realistically after they had gained practical experience of a VET's work:

*Experience makes you strong. Experience has made me into what I am today (5).*

Teaching necessitates constant reflection [9]. Likewise, the data in this study showed that ideal teacherhood seemed to arise from evaluations between oneself and professional and communal factors influencing teaching (see also [59,60]). As the VETs developed their individual personality as teachers and could strengthen their professional identity, they started to accept themselves as they were. This provided them with strength to work as personalities which meant that they had to give up on the preconceived, perhaps unrealistic, role of an ideal teacher and have courage to indulge in teaching situations as themselves.

*My teaching style is quite colorful. But now I dare to be myself! (4)*

Following one's own path is not easy nor can any teacher avoid new challenges and learning or new goals. The uncertain future of professions fester many VETs' minds, but still they want to do teaching well.

*I am more like a coach, expert, educator, and some guide who shows various opportunities that are reasonable for the youth (6).*

*My dream is to work with balanced and nice youngsters who are highly motivated to learn a profession for themselves (9).*

The heterogeneous student material sets pressure for the pursuit of ideal teacherhood in vocational education. Many VETs learned to understand that not all students aim at the top in their field but students' goals and readiness are extremely variable.

*The fact that you have more and more difficult students and their life situations are hard. So, you always have a feeling that, in addition to being able to provide them with right kind of teaching for work life, I should be able to give them good guidelines in life (4).*

### 5.2 The Features of Ideal Teacherhood in Vocational Education

The conception of ideal teacherhood turned into a more realistic one as the VETs' work experience increased. The idealistic ideas from the beginning of their careers became more practice-based and turned into fields of expertise guiding their work and illustrating their core know-how. Ideal teacherhood in vocational education occurred in the VETs' descriptions through six features.

#### **5.2.1 Mastery of one's professional field and ability to act as a reformer**

VETs' own experiences and learning about the profession can function as students' support, especially when it comes to the acquisition of good professional skills and knowledge. Mastery of one's professional field means that the VET knows the nodes and critical points as well as the phases of professional development.

*You have to keep updated all the time, and that is hard for sure. In our field, the technology develops so fast, that you really have to work hard to keep in the picture (7).*

*The purpose is to widen my own expertise. Then I will have more information to distribute to students and more opportunities to realize practical teaching (11).*

Along with their profound mastery of the profession and teaching it to students, VETs influence the renewal of professions and enhance students' readiness for life-long learning.

*And I think that I will never be ready as a person, and therefore, I cannot become ready as teacher either. As I grow as a person, I also develop as a teacher. - - You always have to keep up the profession by developing the professional side. And you cannot become a master in that either. You mature as a human being. (4)*

### **5.2.2 All-round pedagogical expertise**

Ideal VETs know different teaching methods, are able to plan and be flexible in teaching situations according to students' needs, and give room to individuals and various students' learning abilities. Evaluation at its best can also enhance students' learning motivation.

*I would like to develop and know more all the time. I do follow my profession a lot and I like this field and these subjects I teach. And I would like to study, too, in the future (5).*

*I would like to develop into a better expert, for example, of learning difficulties and to encounter the youth with problems (9).*

### **5.2.3 Networking and collaboration**

Ideal VETs can develop professional expertise and students' careers by creating connections with work life. Networks and multi-professionalism necessitate cooperation, and so does the updating of vocational education. Electronic communication, real-time flow of information, and internationalization also demand new forms of cooperation.

*...independent and autonomous teacher's work has more and more changed into cooperation and team work. Teachers have to be able to adjust their teaching and especially evaluations*

*within predetermined dates... mastery over ICT and various registers and follow-up systems, as well as cooperation and interaction skills (12).*

### **5.2.4 Encouragement and support for students**

With even the smallest gestures, VETs can help students to achieve the greatest results—a few words of encouragement can be enough. Teachers' ability to encourage students is also self-enhancing because it strengthens teachers' contentment with their ability to guide, teach, and support.

*...teaching is not the most important thing but learning... I would like to be a VET who never gets into a rut. I would like to develop all the time and know more. I would think that I could transmit this field so that students could construct their professional identities in their own way... (5).*

### **5.2.5 Fostering of justice and equity, bearing responsibility**

VETs are responsible for distributing information, support, and guidance to all vocational education students concerning their study processes and goals, and the contents to be studied. The ultimate goal is to make each and every student feel welcome to education regardless of various background factors, learning histories, and study abilities.

*You have to be extremely fair with them but simultaneously very differentiating as well. VETs' work requires high physical and mental shape (8).*

### **5.2.6 Positive basic values and ability to act as a bellwether**

Teachers can teach students about necessary life skills, resources, strengths and values, as well as attitudes toward oneself, work, and other people. VETs can become irreplaceable and primary models, idols, or bellwethers to their students. Their teaching can show the direction in life or encourage to find one's own goals for studies and life in general.

*...if only you could have the student understand what is best for him or her, why to do this job and study. And why to put one's heart in this job. To*

*become a teacher who inspires them. Or they could fear a little, but not too much, not too frightened to enter. To find a balance in this work, so that it would not become too flaccid (10).*

To find success in life, students need to learn about, for example, diligence, joy, good manners, politeness, modesty, and taking care about the basics in life:

*...take care that your clothes are clean, do not use dirty language and behave well, and do not drink during the weekend, and try to foster your good reputation as the prospective professionals in the field, and teach how to eat healthy, and everything that I as a parent have done with my own children (4).*

### **5.3 The Connection between Ideal Teacherhood in Vocational Education and Professional Identity**

In this study, VETs referred to two professional identity selves when talking about ideal teacherhood in vocational education. These identities are interconnected but can also be viewed separately. They are professional self and personal self (cf. [38,59,61,62]). In Results section 5.2, three first mentioned features represent professional self and three last mentioned belong to personal self.

VETs develop their professional identities and construct their conception of ideal teacherhood in vocational education during their whole careers through reflecting on these two selves in professional identity. Teachers reflect on their experiences of acting as a teacher and compare them with their personal selves and conceptions of their inner beliefs, ethicality, and values.

*It is like two different people fighting (6).*

Reflection helps VETs to form a conception of their professional identity and themselves as ideal VETs: who am I and what am I like as a VET and what do I want to accomplish in this profession. The professional and personal selves in professional identity are in constant, even demanding, dialogue over how to work ideally, how an ideal VET behaves in the first place, what kind of substance knowledge is appreciated and how to develop and update it, what kinds of pedagogical solutions are made in teaching

situations, and how to act and participate in the developmental work at the workplace.

Mostly work seems to be guided by the professional self, which may not necessary represent the true, realistic, and relevant guide for teaching work but merely an ideal image of a VET with unrealistic demands. However, it seems that the personal self, along with a VET's age and work experience, tries to balance between idealistic demands with encouraging, practice-based thoughts.

*At the beginning, I used to take everything really personally, and students' all actions were like I had did them. I worried so much about students' problems and perceived them even too close. This year I have consciously tried to get rid of this feature but I always have to remind myself about it. I am a demanding teacher, strict too when necessary, but still I try to establish a relationship with students that makes the study atmosphere relaxed and active (9).*

Along with time, the personal self helps VETs to act as genuine personalities at work and to accept the incompleteness. This means that VETs understand that it is impossible to reach ideal teacherhood in vocational education, but it is important to pursue toward it.

*Nowadays, I can speak openly like this. Is it because of my age or profession? (10)*

Sometimes, the professional self functions as a sort of shield in a VET's work. On the one hand, it can regulate a VET's behavior so that the teacher does not bring out his or her characteristics, values, or convictions that do not fit in the vocational education context in general. On the other hand, the professional self can help the VET to cope when the work feels overwhelmingly busy, tiring, or mere monotonous toil.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

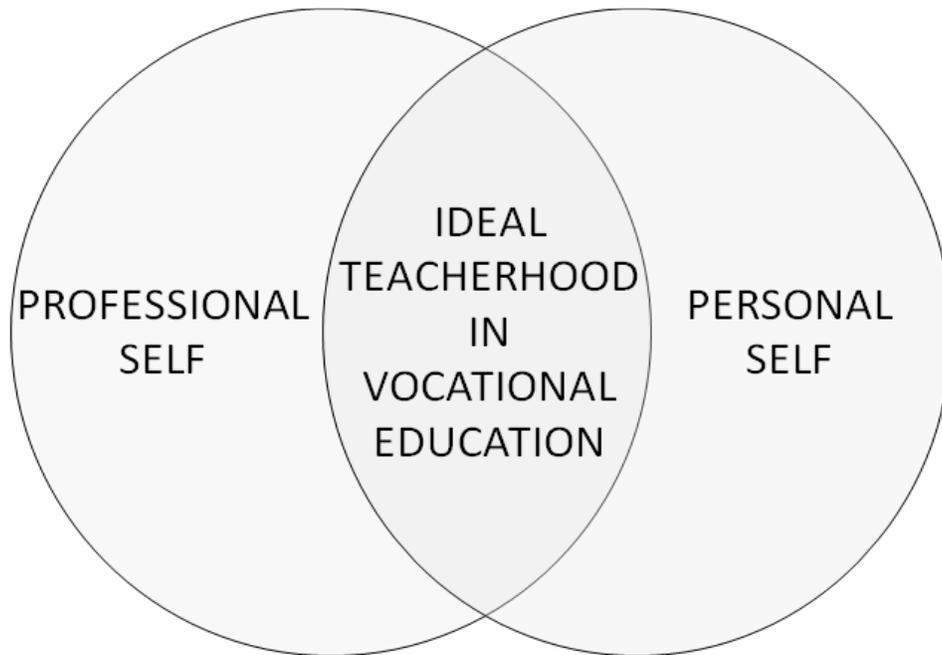
The study showed how VETs found it difficult to describe ideal teacherhood in vocational education at first [63,64], but eventually they connected it with explicit work-related expectations, successful solutions, and goals. Ideal teacherhood in vocational education was also closely connected with a teacher's professional and personal identities. The aforementioned features of ideal teacherhood in

vocational education can also be considered as the manifestations of professional and personal self in professional identity. Therefore, the ideal professional self consists of the mastery of one's professional field and ability to renew it, versatile pedagogical skills, and networking and cooperation skills. Personal self consists of students' encouragement and supporting skills, equality and justice as well as responsibility in teaching, and good basic values and bellwether's role as a teacher. This connection is illustrated in Fig. 1. It shows how the professional self and personal self are interconnected, and ideal teacherhood in vocational education is located in their borderline. When in balance, the emergence of or pursuit toward ideal teacherhood in vocational education is possible.

For VETs, this illustration contributes information about ideal teacherhood from many perspectives. First, when it comes to teachers themselves, the role of professional identity has a great emphasis in VETs' work. They are not only teachers but also experts in their own vocational fields. Therefore, their identity includes elements that, for example, teachers in general education do not necessarily possess. Nevertheless, VETs are teachers too, who, in order to be good teachers, must use their personality as a part of their work.

Second, VET characteristics make a salient part of ideal teacherhood. The combination of these identity dimensions is relevant to realize when dissecting the development of professional identity in VETs. In this study, the research participants were VETs from various occupational fields. Therefore, the illustration in Fig. 1 is not limited to just one field of vocational education but covers various fields: each profession has its own specific features related to a VET's professional self that must be considered when analyzing ideal teacherhood.

Third, this study was based in Finland where vocational education has increased its popularity among the youth having finished compulsory education. Therefore, it is more and more important to focus on ways to enhance the development of teacherhood in vocational education. The new interest in vocational education necessitates thorough understanding about the importance of proper professional identity in VETs, but as teachers in all education levels, personal identities as teachers should not be overlooked either. This viewpoint contributes to the discussion of future development of VETs' work and education not only in Finland but also abroad.



**Fig. 1. Ideal teacherhood in vocational education and teacher identity**

## 7. CONCLUSION

Meaningful work is the source of human well-being [65]. This study showed that identity reflection makes a salient part of VETs' perceived well-being at work [66,67]. The development toward ideal teacherhood in vocational education happens through each teacher's personal reflection including the shift from the dominating professional self to the flourish of personal self and, finally, toward the balance between them. Perhaps, ideal teacherhood in vocational education lies not so much in teachers' outer performances but intrinsic reflection and balance. This does not mean that they would need excellent work-life skills, knowledge, and networks in their special fields, but, when acquired, they make a salient part of their well-constructed professional identity [68]. Eventually, teachers, who are in the first name terms with their vocational education teacher identity, can act as bellwethers and true developers of their fields. They are inspiring and motivating teachers who, due to their expertise, enhance students' learning and are able to educate future experts for the needs of work life.

Therefore, VETs' work includes a distinct ethical dimension. This study showed how VETs' perceptions of the realities of the profession and ideal teacherhood emphasize the ethical side of the work. Teachers' work in general is focused on significant phases and situations in people's lives [69,70,71]. According to Elena Seghedini [72], teachers' ethical action in teaching develops alongside the development of professional expertise and vice versa: professional expertise develops also through ethical action. In Finland, Emmi Enlund, Mari Luokkanen, and Taru Feldt [73] studied teachers' ethical burden and ethical dilemma, and ended up recommending that education institutions should utilize the ethical guidelines composed by trade unions. They would support teachers' work. Common models to help teachers' action in problematic situations could be created based on the guidelines, which would provide teachers with collective certainty in ethical considerations. Williamson McDiarmid and Mary Clevenger-Bright [74] point out that teachers' work and professional development are closely tied in the wider society. According to Kirsi Tirri [75], expertise in teachers' work develops through education and experience and includes freedom and, first and foremost, responsibility to act in the profession.

Indeed, a well-balanced teacher identity and core values are the sources of stability and sense of purpose for teachers [76]. This viewpoint contributes also to the current discussion of stress and coping as well as the sense of self-efficacy in teachers [77,78,79,80]. For example, studies about perceived level of self-efficacy have proven to be the core dimension of preventing and treating teachers' stress [81]. When considering the findings from the point of view of ideal teacherhood, it seems relevant to suggest that a successful identity development and a positive conception of oneself as a VET contributes to the sense of self-efficacy at work and respectively to one's well-being at work as well. These kind of perspectives appear of increasing importance in today's rapidly changing work in all occupational fields, including that of VETs.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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