

Changing vocational special needs education – From teacher to developer

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Abstract

Biographies can be used to examine changes in teaching and analyse how teachers experience education policies. This study focused on 11 vocational special needs education teachers (vocational SNE teachers) who wrote work-related memoirs. Six of them were also interviewed. Qualitative content analysis was used to determine how experienced SNE teachers describe the changes and challenges in vocational education and training since the 1970s. The findings suggested that the work of vocational SNE teachers has changed from segregated student-focused remedial instruction to planning and administrative work with indirect impact. Similarly, a change in competences is evident. The discipline “Special Education” showed very minor role in the interviews. However, the emancipatory ethos, advocacy for those who are in disadvantaged positions, was strong.

Keywords: teacher biographies, special needs education, vocational education

Introduction

This article analyses memoirs written by individuals with a long career in vocational special needs education and interviews with them. The article contemplates how changes in vocational education impacted their work over the decades, how they responded to or participated in these changes and what opportunities to influence things they encountered. Experienced changes in vocational education are also reflected with the development of special needs education as an academic discipline.

Teachers' memoirs and studies based on them are useful in the field of education. At the most concrete level, they can be utilised as learning materials in teacher education; but the potential uses are extensive, starting from the development of curricula to the interaction between teacher and student, say Siivonen, Snellman and Iso-Pahkala-Bouret (2013) when summing up the focus areas in biographical research. For the present day, teachers' memoirs may reveal facts that could help plan teacher education or support teachers' career development. Memoirs bring up the critical phases in a career and professional development which require development or change from the perspective of an individual or society, for example. The meanings attached by teachers to their work reveal their theoretical and/or ethical thinking and their professional awareness (Syrjälä, 2001). Teachers' work experiences also shed light on how development efforts and changes in norms and guidance came about in different times and what they set in motion.

This study examines the notions of special needs teachers ('veterans') with a long career in vocational education regarding their work and its goals, contents and models. The goal is to determine how they describe the new competence challenges posed to their work by the structural changes in vocational education that have taken place over the decades and how they faced these changes.

Research questions:

1. What are the notions of special needs teachers regarding their choice of career?
2. What types of changes to their work do vocational special needs teachers describe?
3. How did vocational special needs teachers act when faced with changes?

Background

The trajectory of the work of vocational special needs education (SNE) teachers follows the structural and pedagogical changes in vocational education. At the beginning of vocational education at the end of the 1890s, there were no qualified VET teachers or SNE teachers. Craftsmen and masters worked in institutions for persons with disabilities and passed their skills to 'educable' persons. It was not before the Second World War that formal VET education and special vocational colleges were established. In the wake of economic growth, the doors were opened for students with special educational needs in general vocational education in accordance with the educational reform in 1970s. The special support model of that time was the 'special class model', where vocational SNE teachers worked autonomously but separately from general classes. Their role in the college was clear: expertise in specialised questions. In the 1990s, again, new legislation and changes in structure and policy generated new models for support in vocational education. The general trend towards individualisation in VET education was implemented in special needs education, too. In the effort to develop inclusive education, the vocational SNE teacher's role was broadened to the consultation and guidance of colleagues in special needs educational issues. Vocational SNE teachers have a close connection to working life in supporting students with SNE in their transition phases. Also, the widening range of diversity challenges vocational teachers to multi-professional work and to networking, for example, with social authorities. The diversity of work roles seems to be a fact.

There is a clear line in vocational special needs education starting from segregated settings for different SNE-target groups in distinctly organised vocational colleges towards structurally multilevel educational environments. A clear expansion in the concept of the special support model is evident within the expanded goals of vocational education (Hirvonen, 2006).

The work and career development of teaching personnel are linked to the social situation of the time, which affects education and its goals (see, for example, Sääntti, 2007). This link is particularly clear for vocational teachers, who work at the interface between working life and education. Especially complex is the work of vocational SNE teachers, who bear a triple role: representing the original vocational field, the pedagogical expertise of that particular field and additionally

special needs education professionalism (Hirvonen, 2006). It can be asked if the work of vocational SNE teachers is more interlinked with Special Needs Education as a discipline or with the changes in the working life and in society. The learning environments in educational stages are different.

Developmental Work Research -framework

Teaching is continuously changing work that lives with the times. According to the Teacher Education Development Programme (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016, pp. 10–11), new education reforms are constantly required. However, many of the reforms end up as superficial phenomena with a weak impact. Clear strategic policies and goals are required in order to implement a permanent change as well as change the ways in which educational institutions operate. The phenomena must be examined comprehensively.

One perspective for research into work performed at educational institutions is provided by the Developmental Work Research -framework (Engeström, 2016), according to which merely depicting the present situation is not enough to understand the work as a whole. The framework can be used to analyse the inner dynamics of the work and the historical change in the interaction between the individual and the organisation. The operational system is usually analysed from the perspective of a particular *operator* or group of operators. This study examines the views of experienced professional special needs teachers regarding their work and its changes. The *subject* of the work refers to the various phenomena and operating models in which the change occurs, such as the forms of implementation of vocational special needs education. The *outcome* refers to the impacts of the change on the work that is studied – in this case, what is expected of special needs teachers and what their work comprises. The *tools* of the operational system are work models, operational guidelines and tools (such as the conceptual models and theories on which the employee bases their actions) or external operational guidelines. In this study, special needs teachers describe different models for implementing special needs education and the pedagogical means that they have used during their career. Also integral to the functioning of operational systems (namely vocational institutions in the context of this study) are the *rules* that

regulate them, i.e. written or unwritten rules, guidelines and norms that have been produced to regulate work activities. In this study, rules refer to the responsibility, independence and freedom of action that special needs teachers describe in their work as well as the regulations and guidelines applied to special needs education. *Community* refers to the context in which the work is performed.

Developmental Work Research involves describing the phases (cycles) in the work's development and the development challenges, i.e. *conflicts*, that arose within these phases (Engeström, 2016, pp. 44–48). The key thing from an employee's perspective is the interpretation of changes and phenomena and the meanings assigned to them. Work history and career phases can also be examined as a cyclical development (Heikkilä & Seppänen, 2014). Need leads to a search for changes, which in turn creates hesitation and the need to make a choice between the old and the new. After this, the new orientation starts to develop, motivation arises towards the new duties, methods, etc. and the new is established. In the cycle of development described by Heikkilä and Seppänen (2014), the employee appears to be an active participant. The work of teachers is also shaped by external pressures, such as normative reforms and the economic framework. In this study, special needs teachers describe their work in the different phases of their long careers, but, above all, the descriptions illustrate how special needs teachers faced the changes and the new competence requirements introduced by the changes to special needs education.

Materials and methods

The research materials were obtained by asking experienced vocational SNE teachers to provide written compositions related to their own career. This request was sent by e-mail to 17 chosen special needs teachers, of whom 11 gave their consent. The research materials were obtained by means of purposeful sampling from key people who possessed extensive knowledge of or experience in the subject or who had been in a position to influence the subject of this study (see Patton, 2014, p. 268). The request for written compositions also included an invitation for those willing to attend an interview. Six of the SNE teachers expressed their willingness to also participate in an interview.

All those who participated had worked in vocational education for no less than 40 years, and most of them as vocational special needs teachers for 20–40 years. At the time of the collection of data, seven of them were already retired, while four were set to retire within a few months of the interview. The participants' ages ranged from 58 to 63.

The topic assigned for the written compositions was 'The phases of my career as a vocational special needs teacher'. The instructions for the composition also proposed themes that the teachers could proceed along with: How and why did you become a vocational special needs teacher? What were the greatest changes during your career? How did these change factors impact you and your work at different times? How did you respond to them? How did they feel? Adversities in your career? Highlights in your career? Which factors have motivated you in your work during your career? The topics of the thematic interview were 1) changes in the work and its regulation during the interviewee's career and 2) changes in the job description, in the subject of the work and in the cooperation.

A total of 11 people provided written compositions, the lengths of which ranged from 662 to 4,632 words. The combined length of the compositions was 49 pages. Six of the teachers who submitted a composition were also interviewed. The combined duration of the interviews was approximately seven hours in total (55 minutes – 1½ hours/interview). The audio recordings were transcribed, producing a total of 95 pages in text materials (font size 12, single spacing). The total number of pages of written text analysed was 144.

All text materials, including both the interview transcriptions and written compositions, were treated as a single dataset. To process the data, the content of the text was first grouped into themes in accordance with Engeström's (2016) model. Data-driven content analysis was used with each theme (Eskola & Suoranta, 2003, p. 19).

Career choice

The special needs teachers already had or soon developed a strong ethos towards 'differences' and assisting those who are 'different' students when they first began their careers in special needs education. Some of the veteran SNE teachers had

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personal experiences of being different or had encountered them in their family, while others could provide good examples from their own training experiences. For some, encouragement from supervisors contributed to the progression of their career path towards special needs education.

I'd gotten to know some vocational teachers and felt that they were all so, you know, incredibly multitalented and experts, so I didn't immediately think it was really for me. But then there was the type of job where you could work with people who were different. (N 4)

At the start of their career, the special needs teachers had great autonomy in their work and a great deal of authority to decide on things related to their own work. However, they had to start their work from scratch and create the models themselves. Although the subject of work was teaching an individual segregated group of students, the model for special needs education was created simultaneously. The subject of the work (teaching students) was based on the special needs teacher's own personal experiences of a good teacher who uses a variety of methods, a teacher's ability to inspire interest or their own experience of being different. They did not pursue special needs teacher education until later.

It was the 80s... we had nothing [...] no room, no curriculum, nothing. Back then, on the first day of school, I was confused ...[...] and was put in the basement of the neighbouring comprehensive school. Then I actually went and asked the principal [...] about the curriculum, and he told me that it didn't matter what game I wanted to play. I was all confused because I hadn't come there to play games... I'd got it (curriculum) from them (teacher acquaintances), [...], and took it to the principal, deputy principal, and then I actually said that if this is not adopted by Monday morning, then I'll no longer teach at this school, and I left. (Week later) he (principal) told me that if it (curriculum) is so important to me, I should do as I saw fit. And I guess that's where my lucky job started, and I didn't really ask about things much afterwards. (N 6)

The level of independence at work was considerable at the beginning of the SNE teachers' careers. However, the work was not appreciated – this appreciation had to be earned. *'The flame of special needs education'* was the driving force. The

appreciation for the work was not only impacted by evidence of good teaching but also by efforts to influence things. The work can be characterised by a 'pioneer spirit', i.e. a strong internal motivation/ethos that was unhindered by work-related disturbance factors since the model was still being created. Independence increased wellbeing: the teachers felt their work to be meaningful and its subject, the outcome (work for the benefit of the students), served as the guideline.

I pretty quickly got this strong desire to step out of line, as they say, and within certain limits of course, [...] I've always said that you can take small side steps from following the law as long as it is not illegal. (N 5)

The relationship with the student is the cornerstone in all teaching, and the teacher is constantly making decisions and performing emotional labour in connection to this relationship (Anttila & Väänänen, 2015). Helping students motivated the young teachers and was usually also a reason for entering and remaining in the field.

Emotions were also brought up in connection with the interviewees' experiences of their relationships with students in recent years. The change in the job description could make the relationship more distant. At the system level, however, the attitude towards students seemed to have changed:

I feel that the student has been raised higher (in terms of appreciation?). It's a big change that the student is now equal... They weren't treated badly before, but there was this attitude. Now they are more here with us and on the same line. (N 1)

Over time, students' families became increasingly involved in the schoolwork. In assessing this, the teachers conveyed their feelings of affection, showing that the student and their position were important to the teachers.

Nowadays, when it (cooperation with families) is 'mandatory', we increasingly encounter situations in which the parents are not in the least interested in their own child's life, which is sad. (N 5)

Both the written compositions and interviews strongly reflected the changed relationship with the student. The teachers also described the students' heterogeneity, which is related to the fact that selection is no longer as intensive. Student intake is greater than before. Alternatively, this poses the question of whether more students now more easily end up in special needs education.

In summary, it can be stated that the competences at the beginning of the establishment of the vocational special support model were based on 'trial', not research-based, but on the personal experiences of diversity of vocational SNE teachers.

Changes during the careers and responding to them

Over the decades, once special needs education became established at vocational institutions, the teachers' position also changed. This caused challenges for the development of the forms of work as teachers were forced to work in a different environment than at the start of their career. However, rather than stop and wait for instructions from external parties, special needs teachers retained their own work ethos and set out to renew their own job description. Still it seems evident that Special Needs Education as a discipline was not highlighted to affect the work of SNE teachers.

Teachers quickly took on the responsibility for influencing things both within and outside the educational institution. This later laid the foundation for the 'teacher in charge of special needs education' (ERVA) system. The ethos of special needs education was visible as courage and as putting oneself on the line, with the subject of the work expanding from students to the institutional level. Obedience towards the teacher's own educational institution's management was not characteristic of the veteran special needs teachers, who instead looked higher for channels to influence things.

For me it was definitely the fact that it was also my style to want to tell people about special needs education, and I always wanted to contact the school board. I was always asking whether the board was aware of this and that, so I always got to go and speak to the board because the principal said that they don't know

anything about this but you do and they trust you [...] we got the information to spread, we were able to speak at parents' evenings, and the resistance from parents kept decreasing all the time because we had so many of these positive experiences. (N 6)

The autonomous work approach had worked in small educational institutions in which the teachers worked alone with a small group of students who needed support, but the change in special needs education's service structure and the increase in diversity in the 1980s caused the focus area in special needs education to change. Teachers had to find their own adapted job description in growing educational communities that were becoming more diverse. A great deal of effort was needed in order to retain special needs teachers' power of decision making and autonomy, such as by influencing politicians/members of a joint municipal authority's board. Despite this, these operators never lost their ethos. Instead, they retained and even strengthened it. The change agency of the veteran special needs teachers was visible in the fact that they started to develop a new service model for special needs education.

The need for this type of networking is growing exponentially, legislation has started to regulate things – I'll just be frank – damn closely, making people afraid, and ordinary teachers don't understand things like those related to confidentiality and work, and there are separate officials who regulate these things now. Now legislation has changed, and we have nested and overlapping laws. (N 2)

The job description of veteran special needs teachers became differentiated during the period starting in 1990s: some proceeded to build an institution-level job description, while others emphasised teaching. The subject of the work changed: the students were no longer the direct subject as they had been in the early years of the work; instead the focus had shifted from students, on students and work targeted at students, to influencing students via paperwork. Sometimes the connection between increased paperwork and promoting student matters could not be found, which in turn led to a decrease in the feeling of autonomy. This was visible in those who worked at special education institutions in particular. This contradiction was evident as a loss of the connection between record-keeping and students. Educational institutions argued for the large amount of record-keeping

based on transparency, uniform quality and the customers' rights. 'Paperwork' also served as a control tool within the organisation, for example by monitoring the realisation of the quality system. Accountability also makes employees and the organisation responsible for ensuring that the resources and funds are utilised in the right manner (see Mänttari-van de Kuip, 2013).

Well it was probably that we had... Back then (in 1970s–1980s), we had time to work with students, a lot of it. And now it has, now it has fragmented, is fragmented. If we start from back then... in those days, we had a lot of time to train because we were using a two-year curriculum [...] Now it has gone over the top, the record-keeping and the need... That, I'd even claim that it's irrelevant for the actual work and with regard to the student learning a vocation... I bet at hospitals, health centres they also do this insane amount of record-keeping, recording information about patients. That's what we're doing now... (N 4)

The teachers felt that the educational institutions' efforts to enhance operations, for example through larger units, cost-saving measures, increased student group sizes or decreased amount of contact teaching, were beyond their reach. The special needs teachers felt conflicted about their decreased autonomy and the fact that their work was being drawn further away from the students.

I think that I wouldn't be able to look at my co-workers and subordinates with bright eyes anymore. That because of that, I couldn't stand being there anymore. (N 1)

You can't bloody force yourself to do it, it's like... It's the type of work where you need to feel joy doing it... And that's why you also need some freedom, you need to be bold on some level and take charge of the teaching and you shouldn't... You shouldn't ask about things or read that curriculum so closely. (N 4)

Working under changing circumstances

Administration was made more complex by structural and curricular changes at vocational institutions starting in late 1990s. At the same time, the special needs teachers felt that administration had drawn further away, becoming invisible,

which created more distance. The prior sense of community and communal support dissolved. The special needs teachers' descriptions of their careers in the final years (meaning the 2000s) focus on the growing difficulty of influencing things. Some of the special needs teachers described their work as being part of a macro-organisation and responding to its requirements.

It's mostly my own understanding that things can't be influenced (today). Not even our own educational institution [...] we're controlled from above and have no say in how... And let's just say that if you criticise things, they're quick to threaten you with inspections, and you can get in trouble if you haven't done exactly as all those legal paragraphs say. But the fact that you feel like you have no opportunity to influence it. (N 4)

In the early special needs education model, special needs teachers were able to directly influence things. Things were handled quickly, without intermediaries. Towards the end of their careers, they found that the organisational structure of administration has a slowing effect on special needs education, which typically requires agility and quick decisions.

It was mostly that in the final years (meaning in the 2000s) our organisation changed again and (units) merged into a larger educational institution. Heads of departments then became the main leaders at the institution. [...] the unit's internal operations were decentralised and fell apart. [...] Then the next change was implemented, and they became units again. And only one head of department was left. In other words, everything was combined back into the same work. (N 3)

What perhaps separates veterans from others is that once 'change agency' was established, this role remained despite all of the aforementioned conflicts in the operational system and their impacts on the subject and content of the work. Despite the administration growing more distant, the teachers continued to develop their own role towards planning and coordination. Challenges in special needs education in changing operating environments were met by changing the subject of special needs education: from a special needs teacher's individual work into broader efforts to influence things at the joint municipal authority's level.

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Supervisors who were responsible for the continuity of education and also for finances, they saw that changes had to be made, and this opened up the opportunity to be, in a certain way, for special needs education... not its supervisor, no, I was never actually a supervisor, but I was, for that group, should I say, the 'head', like they used to call foremen in forestry work... (N 5)

In the second developmental phase of vocational education, during big structural changes, the competences of vocational SNE teachers had to be remodelled according to the size of the learning environments. The interviewees described how they developed an organisational-level work model for special support. The direct, quick and easy contact with students was replaced by indirect contact, influencing students' studies with organisational actions.

Discussion: Starting out from nothing

The careers of the veteran special needs teachers took place during an interesting period that included significant structural changes in vocational education. The committee work in the 1970s and 1980s, the upper secondary education reform (474/1978) and amended legislation (487/1987) initially steered slightly developmentally delayed students towards general vocational institutions directly from special schools. National steering focused on work-oriented special groups, which could be found at 10 different general vocational institutions by the end of the 1970s. By the 1990s, special needs education had been established at all educational institutions and was strengthened with special funding. Individuality, personal and flexible learning paths and a record-keeping obligation (IEP) were introduced in this decade (1990s) (Hirvonen, 2006). During the 1970s and 1980s the traditional approach – 'Diagnose-Intervention-Assessment' – was important in Special Needs Education as a discipline, but it seemed not to fit in vocational education's different environments and activities (Hirvonen, Ladonlahti, & Pirttimaa, 2009, pp. 161–162).

All the components in the operational system have changed. Special needs education was launched at general vocational institutions in the form of clear, separate, small groups intended for a certain target group over the course of two decades, but the operational environment was completely different by the end

of the 1990s. We have shifted from structurally clear and administratively clear educational institutions to large organisations in which special needs education has expanded from teaching to community-level development and the building of a special needs education system. Changes in the degree structure and national steering, reorganisation of the operator structure and paradigm shifts in special needs education placed the veteran special needs teachers in a new situation. In the early years of special needs education, degrees were clear and narrow. The structure of working life enabled the use of assisting labour, which helped those who studied in a special needs class find their place in working life. The structure of vocational education has changed as a result of economic trends, which in turn has also changed the structure of degrees. In the 1990s, a trend began towards more varied educational professions, which also led to a need to change the structure of special needs education. The preparation of individual learning paths began in special needs education, which required more system-level planning than before (Hirvonen, 2006). The re-organising of vocational education occurred from the beginning of 2000s, increasing the administrative duties of teachers.

The veteran special needs teachers started their careers in a structurally clear period. At first, the target group comprised slightly developmentally delayed students who were trained in small groups with a work-oriented approach. Despite the 'simplicity' of the structure, the challenges were great. Special needs groups were established through national steering, but the veteran special needs teachers were in charge of the rest. They had to start from scratch. They had to write their own curriculum and even argue for its importance to the students in special needs education at some educational institutions. The work consisted of organising concrete working conditions, work plans and tools, but the greatest area of work was attitude education. The veteran special needs teachers performed ground-breaking work in creating the first implementation structure for special needs education and a more positive atmosphere with their example.

The solution to the two challenges in the work, namely attitude education and building the structure of special needs education, was found in 'ethos': the work was found to be meaningful from an ethical and legal perspective. Ethos was based on either the veteran special needs teacher's own experiences, observations made in their immediate circle or a general ethical understanding. As there was initially no support available for this difficult situation, the veteran special needs

teachers developed a strong autonomous approach to work: rather than wait for approval, they took action. This autonomy contributed to their feeling of being in control of their work and its effectiveness. Their work motivation was strong and characterised by the spirit of 'fighting for the weak'.

How do you change your own work as educational structures change? The interviews show how the big structural changes in vocational education changed learning environments and in that way created 'conflicts' and a need for developing new work models of vocational SNE teachers' work.

We should consider how the veteran special needs teachers coped with the many changes in their career, how their change agency came to be and how they maintained their pioneer spirit. At the start of their career, their strong ethos guided their work and helped them cope. It was based on either personal experiences or ones gained on their teaching path, and it strengthened their ability to create special needs education models from scratch. Autonomy and the power to make decisions encouraged them forwards. It is equally worth asking how they retained their change agency during major educational shifts. What guided them to try and change the operating method? What encouraged the veteran special needs teachers to continue in their jobs and be happy to do so? According to Mäkitalo (2005), 'subject-based well-being' refers to the connection between an individual's personal experience of the significance and meaningfulness of the work and the shared subject of the work and results that can be achieved with regard to this subject. It is a question of succeeding in an area of the individual's work that is important to them. Even if there is a great deal of work, it is not stressful if the worker has strong feelings of personal success.

Table 1. Changes in the veteran special needs teachers' (in VET) work related with the different educational development periods and Special Needs Education as a discipline

Competence areas of VET teachers interviews	Period	Special Needs Education as a discipline
Trial-based Ethicality, pioneer-spirit to fight for the disadvantaged groups of students	1970s–1980s Major legislative reform; SNE students were accepted as a form of separate groups	Term 'special education' was launched in 70's at the University of Jyväskylä. Special education was on developing phase following and supporting the development of (basic) school practices.
Developing work of SNE teachers, based mostly on the regulations of VET administration and recognised needs of the students	1990s Major structural changes, decreased centralised normative steering; SNE formally established	Special needs education was broader than earlier but concentrated strongly on the research and development in basic education and early education.
Organisational-level developing work of SNE teachers forced by wide structural changes	2000s Re-organisation of VET; from small schools to extended open environments, increased administrative work in SNE	Special Needs Education is still developing its own theory base, and it is estimated to also have a practical identity. The focus has broadened but still lies in practice and on basic education.

The veteran special needs teachers retained their work ethos throughout the decades. The pioneer spirit established at the start of their career held them afloat through their career. Their ethos was strengthened by their autonomy and great power to make decisions, particularly at the start of their career. However, the development of their work was based on 'trial'. Special needs education at that time was not recognised as a discipline, yet. Over the course of decades, their independent position as vocational SNE teachers decreased, and they felt their power slip away, taken away from the people working at the grass-roots level. At the same time, their direct contact with students decreased – it transformed into indirect influence. As the clarity and structural simplicity of the work and teachers' direct influencing ability decreased, the veteran special needs teachers

felt frustrated but still sought a new approach to work. Rather than reminisce about 'the good old times', they developed the special needs education service system to correspond to the new structure. However, Special Needs Education as a discipline did not affect the development of the work because it was focusing mainly on basic education. As a whole, vocational education was not interlinked with research at that time. The development was based on practice and on the administrative regulations of VET colleges.

According to Mäkitalo (2005), changing circumstances at work often lead to a search for the 'guilty party', i.e. structural changes in the work community are individualised. In contrast, if people are able to link the changes to a broader context or rise above their own work, so to speak, they are able to adapt their own work and create new operating models. Although the veteran special needs teachers lost the job description of an independent teacher of a special needs class and with it their autonomous position, they responded to the change by utilising all their skills. The veteran special needs teachers were able to change their work from individual-level work with students to a more extensive, institution-level job description that involved planning and coordination. They understood that the changes in special support were a necessary consequence of the structural change in vocational education. It can be stated that the big structural changes 'forced' the veteran SNE teachers to remodel their work, but special needs education was not affecting the construction of work models. The development was not set in motion by academic- or research-based demands. The initiatives came from the administrative actions of the VET colleges, and they were implemented at the grassroots-level by active teachers. Special Needs Education as a discipline remained weak besides the teachers work. Additionally, special needs education was focusing on the development of special support models fitting only for basic education. However, different learning environments require varied models.

Today, the changes taking place in the education sector are a matter-of-course. Teachers and other personnel are required to have the ability to adapt to changes and the impacts of these changes on their own work. Staff are required to have the ability to act under changing circumstances – not only by adapting but also by developing new types of work methods and models. 'Subject-based well-being' (Mäkitalo, 2005) is simultaneously put to the test. If the staff feel that the changes

are out of their reach, they may be at risk of becoming frustrated and losing some of their work motivation.

Changes in education impact the work of special needs teachers. One example of this is the strengthening of the position of general subjects in vocational education. This challenge has been met by hiring 'part-time special needs teachers', whose position is still taking shape (Pirttimaa & Hirvonen, 2014). The work of special needs teachers has been and continues to be subject to a variety of expectations, particularly with regard to the teaching and guiding of 'difficult' students. Instead of individual-level questions, a solution could be found in consultation, guidance provided by teacher colleagues, and structural work (Hirvonen, 2015).

Studying the changes in work and the related factors may provide a clearer understanding of one's own work (Engeström, 2016). The work is examined more comprehensively as a part of social changes. Memoirs are well-suited for the examination of the experiences of changes in teachers' work (Syrjälä, 2001). At best, they reveal facts that benefit both teacher education instructors and thereby future teachers. Study of changes could also be utilised in teachers' continuing education, for which 'veteran teachers', seniors, provide a rarely utilised resource. The hard yet rewarding work of teachers requires not only knowledge and skill but also the ability to develop one's own skills and autonomously position one's own work in the chain of changes.

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