Being transformed and transforming oneself in a time of change: A study of teacher identity in second language education for adults

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Being transformed and transforming oneself in a time of change: A study of teacher identity in second language education for adults

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes a perspective on professional identity in times of change to explore what societal changes of significance for second language education for adults mean for the teacher’s professional identity. It differs, thus, from many other studies on teacher identity, which concentrate on one educational reform. The study, which applies situated learning theory, is built on semi-structured interviews with 13 teachers in this sector. The results show that migration, marketization and streamlining, and digitalisation imply changes, which have a profound effect on the teachers. Whereas some changes mean that the teachers can develop their teaching or strengthen their position in work-related communities, other changes restrict them. Moreover, the response of the teachers depends on their judgement about what the changes mean for their teaching and the learners. Teachers position themselves by, for example, claiming to possess the competence they see as essential to meet the learners’ needs.

KEYWORDS

Teacher identity; adult education; second language education; initial literacy teaching; situated learning

Introduction

Teachers in adult and second language education must relate to the rapid and extensive changes that take place in today’s world. The role of adult educators and the degree of professionalization they require have become topics for discussion, as adult education has grown and received more attention. The perceived need for increased professionalism is often expressed as a factor in increased competition, sustainability and lifelong learning (Nicoll and Edwards 2012). Adult education should meet a number of demands, such as action to promote citizenship and personal development, and to prepare workers for the labour market (European Commission 2016). However, globalisation and developments in information and communication technology (ICT) are changing the nature of work. This leads in turn to curriculum changes, and thus educational organisations must be more flexible and the teachers...
must be prepared to change (Nicoll and Edwards 2012). The professionalization of adult educators is echoed in the core competences stipulated for European adult educators. These include that the teachers should be susceptible to new learning by being flexible, reflective and able to evaluate their own practice (see Bernhardsson and Lattke 2012).

An extensive sector within adult education is second language teaching and learning, which is intended to facilitate the establishment of immigrants in society. The students are to learn the official language as a tool for further studies, work and a smoother integration. The work described here was carried out in Sweden, one of the European countries that has recently received many asylum seekers (Eurostate 2016). As a consequence, second language education has expanded extensively in a short period. Swedish for immigrants (SFI), the introductory second language education, accounts for 40% of the students enrolled in formal complementary adult learning activities (Swedish National Agency for Education 2017a). Since many of its students will probably continue to study other types of adult education (in order, for example, to complete the basic and secondary studies and/or obtain vocational training), SFI teachers play a key role in Swedish adult education.

Changes in the field of adult education and introductory immigrant education imply that the teachers’ professional landscape is in constant change. This study explores what this means for the professional identity of a particular group of SFI teachers.

Teacher identity in times of change

While it is true that teachers’ professional identity is undergoing constant change, some periods can be identified when the change is more critical (Beauchamp and Thomas 2009). One such period arises when reforms in education are introduced. Several studies have illustrated how teachers negotiate identity in relation to such changes and/or what determines the nature of their response. In her study of teachers with regard to educational reform context and discourses, Buchanan (2015) showed how teachers demonstrate agency by either exceeding the expectations of the teacher role (‘stepping up’), or resisting or negotiating local and regional policies with which they did not agree (‘pushing back’). Other studies have shown that some teachers may approve a certain reform while others oppose it or hold an ambivalent attitude. The response can be either passive or active (Vähäsanantane and Billett 2008; Vähäsanantane and Eteläpelto 2009).

The response must be understood in the context of the teachers’ work, and it must be recognised that it is at the same time related to a particular point of a teacher’s career (Vähäsanantane and Billett 2008), their work experiences, prospects for the future, and sense of identity (Vähäsanantane and Eteläpelto 2009). Moreover, certain reforms may have an emotional effect on the private and professional identity of the teacher, by putting personal, moral and social concerns at risk. Not only enthusiasm but also negative feelings towards a reform may relate to, for example, the students and the view of the teaching task and subject (van Veen et al. 2005). Adult educators in Sweden resisted the pressure of standardizing their teaching, since they believed that standardization would prevent them teaching with quality and meeting the needs
of the students (Fejes et al. 2016). Teachers can take on ‘occasional identities’ to respond to a new order, while maintaining the core values of a previously developed identity, which outlive the agendas of the change (Day et al. 2005). Even if the wider political and social contexts mediate teacher identity, it is less likely that reforms can change a well-established idea of it (Lasky 2005).

Another way of responding to change is to withdraw. Liu and Xu (2011 2013) describe how some teachers in a reform context came to choose an outbound trajectory from a teaching community since they, due to their lack of belief or expertise in the reform ideas, were not acknowledged as legitimate members. They could not alter their professional identity to be in line with these ideas.

Teachers position themselves, within a reform context. The positioning takes the form of a constant dialogue, in which the school’s policy plays a significant part (Luttenberg et al. 2013). Some conditions make it easy for teachers to position themselves against a change. Buchanan (2015) points out that opposition to a reform was most efficient ‘where teachers shared a set of commitments and practices that aligned to a vision of quality teaching and learning’ (p. 715). Another study (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2003) showed that local school changes that threatened teachers’ core practices were more easily averted when the management was flexible and acknowledged the teachers’ ways of working. Moreover, Felstead et al. (2009) show how the relationship between the collective and individual identities of workers is challenged by managerial influence. Their study does not focus on teachers, but displays how essential the workplace management is for the alignment of identities.

**Aim and research questions**

Previous research has shown that teachers face constant change, and that their professional identity is negotiated with respect to this. However, most studies of teacher identity and change have concentrated on a specific national educational reform context. I have chosen to deal instead with change from a broader perspective, seeking to capture teacher identity in the light of the changing nature of the occupational practices. The aim is to explore what societal changes of significance for the field of second language education for adults mean for the teacher’s professional identity. The study focuses on teachers’ accounts of their professional development and work, and answers the following questions:

- What types of change affect the work of second language teachers for adults?
- What do the changes imply for the teachers’ workplace practices and their positions in work-related communities?
- How do the teachers respond to change?

This article does not discuss all changes that the teachers have experienced during their time as SFI teachers: it discusses the changes that the teachers bring up and relate to their own actions.
Conceptual framework

This study concerns how teachers are being transformed and how they transform themselves when faced with change. I use concepts from situated learning to analyse these processes. Accordingly, identity is a trajectory of learning in different communities of practice (see Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Identity is a way of being rather than a self-image, and, thus, the actions of the members of a community are central. Identity is a matter of both participation and reification of one’s participation in a community (Wenger 1998). It involves learning to understand and apply a number of concrete artefacts, such as language and tools, and to gain familiarity with the tacit conditions of the community (Handley et al. 2006).

The community of practice can be likened to a ‘regime of competence’, i.e. the expectations and principles connected to membership. In short, to be ‘competent’ means that one understands the enterprise of the community, and is capable and permitted to engage in it together with fellow members and with the set of resources found in the community. What one is supposed to know and to be is a matter of the community’s regime of competence (Wenger 1998). The regime of competence is bound up with a process known as ‘alignment’. Alignment concerns how members act with regard to the activities and regulations of the community, for example how the members follow regulations and how they strive to reach goals. One does what it takes to be a part of the community and, in that way, one comes to belong. Members with a high status are accountable to the esteemed competences (Wenger 1998; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). When a new element is introduced into the practice, the community will either embrace or reject it. Even a single member can identify or dis-identify with the community, depending on how strong the need of belonging is. The stronger this need, the more one must be accountable to the regime of competence. Alignment, however, is not passive surrender to rules and authorities: it includes the ways members seek to change a regulation or follow it (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). From this, the point of departure is that the teachers’ professional identity is transformed when the communities they belong to change and, moreover, that they themselves participate in this process by negotiating the regime of competence of these communities.

The idea of ‘agency’ is useful in understanding the teachers’ process of alignment. Teacher agency is the term used to describe how teachers, in relation to their work and professional identities, influence matters and take decisions and standpoints (Vähäsantanen 2015). It is exercised when individual teachers deploy personal strategies to cope with change (Vähäsantanen and Billett 2008). At the same time, agency is intertwined with social structures. A worker may actively engage in a job activity both if she/he is compelled to a certain extent to do so, and if it corresponds with his/her self-concept (see e.g. Billett and Somerville 2004; Luttenberg et al. 2013). Since agency is a matter of, for example, relations and practices within the work place practice on the one hand, and of personal experiences, abilities and identity on the other, agency is individually and socially resourced (Vähäsantanen 2015). Moreover, the term ‘collective agency’ is used to refer to professional communities that ‘exert influence, make choices, and take stances in ways that affect their work and their professional identities’ (Hökkä et al. 2017, p. 38).
Work-related changes are to be negotiated in the context of not only membership in professional communities within the local school, for example the work team, but also membership of broader professional communities, such as the overall SFI teacher community. I use the concept 'landscape of practice' to understand the significance of the relationships between these communities for the teachers' identity. A landscape of practice is defined as a 'body of knowledge ... consisting of a complex system of communities of practice and the boundaries between them' (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015, p. 13). Among other things, the concept of a landscape suggests that a negotiation is necessary not only in each community of what competence it is that should be valued. The negotiation will involve competing voices between the different practices in a landscape. There is a hierarchy between them, since not all knowledge is recognized (ibid.). This means that what is valued in e.g. the teachers' work team community is not necessary what is valued in, for example, the overall school community or in the community of SFI education in general. The teachers must approach these multiple regimes of competence in the landscape. Their agency then, may be nurtured by the community or communities with which they more strongly identify.

To conclude, professional teacher identity is, in this study, mainly understood from the teachers' actions, and from the position they have and negotiate in and between different communities in the occupational landscape.

**Context**

The study is set in the context of the SFI educational system. This system is the structure in which immigrants learn the Swedish language. It has been the subject of many changes, the most relevant of which for this study are described here. The government started to support second language education for adults in 1965, but it was not until 1986 that a national curriculum and regulations for teacher quality were laid down (Lindberg and Sandwall 2007). Other directives have followed. For example, a regulation from 2003 states that SFI should offer three study tracks, depending on the educational background of the students. The curriculum has also undergone change, for example, the goal that the students should learn to use digital tools has been introduced (see e.g. Ministry of Education 2003; Swedish National Agency for Education 2012).

Such changes have led to SFI becoming more standardised, but responsibility for the quality of SFI was shifted in 1991 from the state onto the municipalities. This made it more difficult to initiate national activities for developing the education (Lindberg and Sandwall 2007). Another process that has led to SFI becoming more diverse was placing adult education into an outsourcing system in the mid-1990s (Fejes et al. 2016). The municipality can now outsource all or parts of SFI education to companies or organisations. The bidders who are regarded to offer the best education at the lowest cost will be awarded the contract, which is usually for a period of two years, with the opportunity to apply for an additional year. Alternatively, the municipality may decide to carry out all SFI education itself (Ministry of Education 2013). The marketization has had a big impact on the work of SFI teachers. A study
of a certain region in Sweden (Beach 2004) showed, for example, that the restructuring that followed the outsourcing reform has had many negative effects. One positive effect was that some teachers were able to start their own schools, specialising in teaching adults with little previous education. It was, however, not possible to know in advance if one’s school would have its contract renewed, and professional freedom was reduced. According to Beach (ibid., p. 178) teachers were ‘forced to accept and adapt to the requirements of a new market identity or leave (or be excluded from) the adult education sector’.

Folk high schools in Sweden also offer SFI education. These schools offer a certain type of civic education for adults, and may not only purchase SFI education from the municipality, but also, since 2010, apply for permission to set up a separate but equivalent SFI education (SKOLFS 2009). They may operate such education without being regulated by the municipality (SKOLFS 2009/10:68), and, they contribute in this way to the diversity of the SFI landscape.

Whether making SFI more uniform or more diverse, the changes described are the state’s attempts to meet societal needs. These needs may be, for example, to make SFI more efficient and to make it easier for immigrants to obtain employment, and they are better seen in the light of the expansion of SFI sector. Due to increased numbers of refugees and immigrants, the number of SFI students has risen substantially. In 1997, there were 40,457 students enrolled, which had increased to 150,142 in 2016 (Swedish National Agency for Education 2017b).

**Method**

This exploration of teachers’ professional identity in regard to changes in the landscape of SFI is an inductive study based on semi-structured interviews with 13 teachers. All the teachers taught Literacy Education and Second Language Learning for Adults (LESLLA) with little or no previous education. Thus, they taught in study track 1, which consists of Course A and Course B of the SFI syllabus, and is more basic and has a slower pace than the other tracks (Ministry of Education 2003). The focus on one type of SFI teacher, the LESLLA teachers, serves to demarcate the study. This is useful since there is no delimitation in terms of type of change.

The teachers worked in four different schools. Two were run by the municipality, one by a private company, which outsourced its activities, and the fourth by a folk high school, which had permission to run SFI independently. Two of the research participants were men, and 11 were women. LESLLA students are usually taught by SFI teachers, but some schools also employ mother tongue teachers. These teachers are to teach Swedish with the students’ mother tongue as a tool. In this study, three teachers were currently employed as mother tongue teachers, and a further two used a students’ mother tongue in their teaching. The average length of experience of LESLLA teaching was 5–10 years, the shortest being less than two years. The differences between the schools and the teachers contribute greater variation in the data.

The interviews of the study were semi-structured. Among other things, this implied that I, could initially ask the teachers to talk relatively freely about how they had become LESLLA teachers and developed as such, and then ask supplementary
questions to shed further light on what they had brought up (see Fylan 2005). Finally, I asked the teachers about their current work situation and what they imagined they would be doing in the future, and how they wished to develop professionally.

This study is part of a larger project on LESLLA teacher identity, and the interviews did not focus on ‘change’. Rather, it was a theme that came up directly or indirectly during many of the interviews. This reflects the study’s inductive nature – it was not just the concepts for interpreting the data that emerged from the interviews, but also the very aim of the study (see Braun and Clarke 2006). After having discovered that ‘teacher identity during the process of change’ was a common theme, I read the 19 interview transcripts of the overall project thoroughly, and based the study on the 13 which covered this topic. Since the study is part of a larger research project, I have also observed the teachers’ work and conducted un-recorded, less formal interviews with three of the principals. These data are not primary sources for the analysis presented here, but have helped to contextualize the teachers’ accounts.

The interview data are understood to be the teachers’ subjective understanding of themselves and the work practices of which they are part. Even if the teachers’ accounts reflect actual changes, it is their subjective experiences and their articulated responses to them that are essential.

The interviews with the teachers were conducted in Swedish, audio-recorded, and transcribed. The data were then analysed thematically. I began to read the transcripts carefully to become more familiar with the data (see Braun and Clarke 2006) and to identify possible overall themes. Since the majority of all interviews in the project reflected changes that the teachers had experienced, I decided to concentrate on this matter in with respect to teacher identity (which is the overall topic of the research project). Next, I started to actively code the data. The first round of coding generated several categories of change and the teachers’ negotiations of them. I summarised these categories into themes in the subsequent round, and these were reviewed many times (see Braun and Clarke 2006). I used the NVivo software program 2.1 to obtain an overview of the categories and their relationships with the themes and subthemes. Later on, I started to see possible connections between the themes that had emerged

### Table 1. Background information of the teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Type of school system</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Period working as a LESLLA/ as an SFI teacher*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agnes</td>
<td>Municipal</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Medium/Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>Municipal</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Uncertain/Very long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>Municipal</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Long/Long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petronella</td>
<td>Municipal</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Short/Short</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omed</td>
<td>Municipal</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingrid</td>
<td>Outsources</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Medium/Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonora</td>
<td>Outsources</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Long/Long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milly</td>
<td>Outsources</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Very long/Very long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sazan</td>
<td>Outsources</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Long/Long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann-Sofie</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Very long/Very long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geedi</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Medium/Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omaira</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Long/Long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roya</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Medium/medium</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*short: <5 years; medium: 5–10 years; long: 10–15 years; very long: >15 years.
and the theoretical perspectives, which I apply in the overall study project. The concepts of community and landscape of practice, regime of competence, alignment, and agency reflected the data accurately and helped me comprehend the data.

I selected quotations to illustrate the findings and translated them into English. It was difficult to find accurate expressions that not only reflected the correct meaning but also did justice to the interviewees. A general guideline was to choose formulations that were as close as possible to those used by the research participants to give voice to the participants (see Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Grammatical divergences, however, were omitted in favour of a standard language, and repeated words and fillers were removed. This allowed the reader to pay attention to what the respondent wished to say. The authenticity of the data was to be balanced with the transferability, so that the findings can be of relevance in other contexts (see Lincoln and Guba 1985). The study follows the ethical guidelines set by the Swedish Research Council (2017). This means, among other things, that the research participants gave their consent to participate after being informed about the study, and those pseudonyms have been used to ensure confidentiality.

**Findings**

**Broader societal changes influencing the teachers**

This section presents the broader, societal changes that were most prevalent in the teachers’ accounts and explores what they implied for the teachers’ actions and positions in the school communities.

**Migration**

One of the most influential changes was the recent increase and variety in migration. This has caused the number of students to increase. One of the principals stated that the total number of students in his school had grown from 800 to 1300 students in a little more than a year, and a further 600 students were expected for the coming term. The increase in the number of students affected the teachers both positively and negatively.

On the positive side was that it provided job opportunities. Sazan, a teacher who before being employed in SFI had faced years of difficulties of getting a job, brought up this point. Another interviewee, Geedi, told how the increase had led to the employment of an administrator, and, thus, fewer administrative tasks for the teachers. Others pointed out that the increased number of LESLLA students was linked to a greater attention and awareness of LESLLA teaching and learning. Louise, Omed and Ann-Sofie remembered that there had been little knowledge of LESLLA in SFI in the 1990s and the early 2000s, and very little teaching material was suitable for adult learners of initial literacy. Omed saw how subsequent research had illuminated, for example, the importance of treating the emergent reader as a resourceful adult, and the need to see that learning is something that takes place also outside of the classroom. He had also observed a shift to a student-centred teaching. Louise believed that this development was related to the expansion of the LESLLA sector:
The status increased a little. People began to talk more about that illiterates existed: “We offer initial literacy teaching”. Ambition started to increase. The National Centre [of Swedish as a Second language] offered several courses in initial literacy teaching and [provided] networks. Here at the school, we grew as a work team, too… We got more students and grew stronger… From the beginning, it was only me who talked about this [LESLLA]. Then Beatrice and Erika came. We worked for and advocated initial literacy teaching… All the others [said]: “But this is not SFI… Those students…are not to be here in SFI.” There was a great ignorance here of what we did. But now everyone is aware of our existence… We are very strong and have a very strong identity… We stand up for our students and work hard to be visible.

The quotation illustrates a growing body of LESLLA knowledge in the overall SFI community, a development that was caused by an increase in the numbers of LESLLA students and teachers, and that served to strengthen the LESLLA teachers’ position in the overall school community. LESLLA teachers developed competence from national courses, becoming more aware of the particular nature of their learners and their teaching. The increased competence of the teachers led to professional recognition. Moreover, the quotation reflects how the stronger position of LESLLA teachers depended on the existence of a local community of LESLLA teachers. Not until they were a group of colleagues did they possess a voice strong enough to be recognized as legitimate members of the SFI teacher community.

However, not all changes that the increased number of students implied were welcomed without reservation. Some interviewees pointed out that the increase introduced restrictions on how the teachers could organise their work. Agnes complained about more crowded premises. Further, the classrooms were to be used more often, and this meant that the teachers could no longer plan as they wished. The crowdedness made her anxious over her future. The lack of space had led to another work team in the school being moved to a building in another part of the city, and further moves were being discussed. Was Agnes’ work team to go next?

Increased migration led to fluctuations in the numbers of students from different language groups. War and conflicts increased the quantity of students from certain areas. During the 1990s, there were many Bosnian-speaking LESLLA learners within SFI, but when I carried out the interviews in 2014–2016, there was hardly anyone. Ann-Sofie had learned Bosnian to facilitate the students’ learning, but she could not make use of this language when learners with other mother tongues arrived:

After a while, two women from Afghanistan came to that group too… But I didn’t speak any Pashto at that time. They were my first Pashto students, so I couldn’t refer at all to their language and it felt like an incredible loss.

The change led to Ann-Sofie losing the opportunity to teach with the support of a certain language, and, thus, an opportunity to facilitate the students’ learning. In that sense a competence that had previously been essential for pursuing the enterprise of the community lost its value (see Wenger 1998).

**Marketization and streamlining**

Some changes occurred because of a requirement that SFI become more efficient. This took the form of the launching of an outsourcing system in the middle of the 1990s. The nature of the system implies that schools in many municipalities must
compete for the right to offer SFI education and/or compete with others for students. One positive effect of this was that the teachers were given the opportunity to start their own school. Milly had done so together with her colleagues, in order to be able to use a special kind of pedagogy for LESLLA learners. However, the negative side effects were more common in the accounts of the teachers teaching in such conditions. They experienced higher levels of job insecurity. Despite an increase in the number of students in SFI they risked losing their job if the school lost a contract after the competitive tendering process. When I asked Milly, who was approaching retirement age, whether she would continue to teach, she answered that she might – ‘if our school still exists. We’ll know that in December’. The statement expressed an uncertainty that the teachers lived with as a result of the outsourcing system.

Another example of how the outsourcing system affected the teachers can be given from the folk high school. The principal described how the teachers of the school’s SFI courses had been laid off when the contract with the municipality had not been renewed. Only after the school had successfully appealed against the decision were they re-employed. To prevent something similar from happening again, the school applied for and received permission to run SFI independently. This meant that the existence of the school’s SFI education no longer depended on municipality decisions, and gave the school the freedom to expand the teaching. The school was, however, still part of the market, and thus competition to recruit students remained. This was reflected in how some of the teachers brought up the school’s unique teaching approach as an advantage in the competition.

Teachers also stressed impaired work conditions as a consequence of the efforts to streamline the SFI education. Omed criticized a decrease in the number of teaching hours granted for the LESLLA learners in his municipality. He believed that this stressed the learners. Other teachers brought up restrictions in their professional autonomy, more administrative work, an increased number of weekly teaching hours, and/or fewer weeks of vacation. Ingrid, especially, articulated how such changes made her feel highly stressed:

> It is terribly stressful since we got more lessons a week... So, it’s not the same joy. I like to teach. I love the job, but to constantly feel stressed... I want to make good lessons. I don’t just want to turn up.

The stress that Ingrid felt was linked to the frustration of not being able to do a job that she could be satisfied with. The restrictions in the work conditions prevented her from exercising her agency of making good lessons. She was compelled to fit into the structures, but they did not correspond with the image she had of herself as a teacher.

**Digitalisation**

Recent curricula for SFI state that the students should develop their abilities in using digital tools and most teachers stated in the interviews that they often used digital presentations, iPad apps and computer programs in their teaching. The digitalisation of teaching has had many implications. iPad apps have made the teaching less teacher-centred. Since the students were emergent readers, the teachers could not ask them to sit and read or write by themselves. But with an app, the students could
carry out a literacy exercise without depending on the teacher telling them what to do next. This released time for the teachers to prepare a homework assignment or, more commonly, to attend to individual students to give instructions or assess their literacy progress. Moreover, many teachers described how certain digital programs helped the students to learn reading, writing and speaking Swedish, and some described how the tools created additional activity in the classroom.

Students’ use of digital tools could also help the teachers to widen their view of the learners. Leonora said:

I was surprised that one of these guys was filming. Because they, one thinks that the LESLLA groups, well, well… Still, he couldn’t read, but had learned the technique and used it to be able more quickly to take on the new language… He wants to understand, even though he has never gone to school.

This quotation is an example of how a teacher, through a student’s independent use of a digital tool, came to realise that there were differences in potential and learning strategies among the learners.

The examples given in this section illustrate how the application of digital artefacts contributes to transforming teaching practice and the values embedded within it. Moreover, digitalisation has had implications for the teachers’ position in the school communities. Some teachers gave the impression that they quickly and deeply applied tools in their teaching, and some teachers instructed their colleagues, either in assigned sessions or by giving advice more informally. Digital competence is valued in the professional communities and enables the teacher to occupy a central position.

**Actions taken in response to changes**

This section concentrates on how the teachers responded to the changes to which they were exposed.

**Aligning to changes in regard to the teaching and learning**

The teachers responded in different ways to the proposed or enforced changes. Changes that were seen to develop the teaching and learning were embraced. For example, when it came to the digitalisation of lessons, the teachers were often self-driven in learning how to apply digital tools, either by trying them out themselves or by asking a more experienced colleague. Generally, the values of, for example, the work team and the curriculum were seen to be compatible with the digitalisation, and the teachers could therefore align with it.

At the same time, the teachers opposed changes that were seen to have a negative effect on the teaching and learning. This can be seen in, for example, the way in which the LESLLA work team at one of the schools opposed the management’s suggestion to change the way of classifying students according to ability even in the A-course. However, this response, too, speaks of alignment. The teachers believed that the present system, which they had initiated themselves, gave higher educational quality. Thus, they rejected the suggested change.

Even if opposing a change, the teachers were often unable to prevent it. But there were other forms of resistance. Like some of her colleagues, Ann-Sofie brought up
how they at her school had set up a project aimed to help the students and the teachers to see the literacy progress. It was a response to changes in the SFI curriculum:

I hope for the sake of SFI … that the reading and writing process will be visible again … One really should know how big it is and what it means and all the work it requires, so that one doesn’t take it lightly. Because it’s so sad that that formulation was used in the new syllabuses or curricula … So we were so happy that we got that money from the National Agency of Education last year and could work a little extra to make it visible.

The quotation indicates that the teachers did not passively surrender to a change, even one made at the national level. They compensated for the lost literacy perspective by taking their own initiative to make initial literacy learning visible in teaching.

**Positioning oneself through highlighting the particular needs of one’s students**

That the changes were often related to the teaching and learning implies that the students were in the centre of the negotiation. Moreover, the teachers talked about the particular nature of the LESLLA students and their needs.

Since we teach our students over a long period… We’ve a lot of knowledge of our students, unlike the teachers in study track 2 or 3. Because, there, the students come, and in one term they have finished the C or the D course. And they might work and do many other things, and they can study in a completely different way than our students. They’ve studied at universities around the world. They don’t need you as a helper in that way. Whereas our work team is the only Swedish contact our students have… They go home and to school and then they go shopping and not much more, if I generalize… We get to know everything. We’re to look at all documents they receive in their mailbox… They’re to go to the maternity welfare and to the psychologist with their child or something. That’s not something that students in track 3 need to tell their teacher, because they read it and understand it by themselves. (Agnes)

This quotation is an example of how LESLLA teachers used the particular nature of their students to define themselves. Here, Agnes depicted herself and her colleagues as the ones who understood the LESLLA learners’ needs, and by doing that she claimed that she possessed a certain kind of caring competence not found in the other teacher communities of SFI. She contrasted the LESLLA students with the students in track 3 – the most reverse (stereo)type of SFI students since they, generally, have participated in higher education before becoming SFI students.

Such arguments were brought forward by Agnes and her colleagues when referring to the principal’s suggestion to change the way the students were divided into different classes. Even if such a positioning towards other groups of teachers was not as explicit in the other schools, the teachers, in general, claimed that their students had a particular nature and, thus, also did LESLLA teaching, when they negotiated the changes. Sometimes this was done indirectly, for example by saying that the shortened holidays implied less time for the teachers to recover from and reflect over the demanding type of teaching that the LESLLA learners needed. A more concrete example is the criticism teachers brought up towards the fact that initial literacy had become invisible in the curriculum. Whereas Geedi said that the present regulations did not meet the students’ needs, Anne-Sofie believed that the project they had initiated as a response to the changes had contributed to increased self-confidence of the students and made the learning goals more visible for them.
Demonstrating individual and collective agency

The response to a change, whether it was connected to one’s students or one’s position in a work community, was related to each teacher’s situation and experiences. This is a case of individual agency. In one school, for example, the teachers emphasized that they did not have to stay and work at their current school. However, even if they all made use of such a strategy to cope with the uncertain future or the impaired work conditions, personal circumstances and reasons laid behind the decision of where to work. Whereas Milly said she could retire whenever she no longer experienced work as positive, Leonora considered other job offers to keep her professional freedom and creativity, while Sazan said she could leave SFI for teaching in an upper secondary school if the conditions got worse. Ingrid, on the other hand, brought an argument from her private sphere when negotiating the changed work conditions. She had a young child, and, thus, she wanted to work in a place where the teachers still had more vacations. Moreover, Ingrid elaborated on what the changing of jobs would imply.

I’m trying to change … If there’s a permanent position, I’ll take it, even if it’s really nice here. But two additional months of vacation in a year, it’s worth so much more! And I’ve material to teach with, so it’d be good to continue within SFI, or I’ll do something else. I’ve changed work many times, so I know it’ll be hard for a year and then it’ll get better.

The quotation shows that Ingrid, due to her former professional experiences, was not afraid of getting another job. She already had teaching material to use in the new job context and she knew that a change would only require a special effort for a limited period.

The interviews at another school showed that the teachers had demonstrated collective agency in their negation of a change. Agnes described the reaction of her work team to the management’s proposal to reorganise the class structure:

When the principal comes and says that there are three empty seats for three new A students, we reply: ‘No, they do not fit in there … There’s no space in 11A.’

No, but there’s space in 13A or 14A.

‘No, but they can’t go there,’ we said, ‘it doesn’t work’.

And then, he growls a little and, often, it ends with: ‘Well, yes, do as you usually do.’

We’ve gotten a kind of reputation, I believe. We’re like: ‘Don’t come here with some strange ideas, which we don’t like, because we won’t buy it’. And then it is not so easy, I guess, to have 15 of these [teachers] saying no!

Here, Agnes stated how she and her colleagues, in spite of external pressure on the school to receive new students faster, managed to resist the principals’ ideas of changing the class structure. This statement is supported by her colleagues, who also elaborated on this issue. The teachers’ responses reflect a collective agency in preventing the school management from enforcing the change. This seems to be rooted in, and contribute to, a collective identity. Agnes, as well as her colleagues, talked about herself and her fellow LESLLA teachers as a ‘we’, who shared the same ideas and acted
together. Moreover, the successful rejection of the principal’s idea strengthened the picture they held of themselves, as members of a competent and powerful work team. They also contrasted themselves with their image of the other teacher communities at the school.

**Discussion**

This study seeks to comprehend what societal changes of significance for the field of second language education for adults mean for teachers’ professional identity. Below, I discuss what the result says about this issue.

**Being transformed and transforming oneself**

The findings illustrate that the teacher identity is transformed by external forces at the same time as the teacher contributes to the transformation of her/himself. Global courses of events: migration, and new educational policies at the national level such as marketization and streamlining, and digitalisation are changes that transform work practices. They lead to a shift in the regime of competence in the teaching practice and other professional communities to which the teacher belongs (see e.g. Wenger 1998). The efforts to streamline the education and meet the demands for educating a large number of newly arrived adults with different mother tongues put pressure on the schools. Such pressure led, for example, to shorter vacations, an increase in the hours of teaching obligation, and/or maximal use of the classrooms. Likewise, the outsourcing system implies uncertainty for the teachers who depend on it, and all teachers face changes in the curriculum. Some of these changes, even if they weaken the teacher’s position or are difficult to align with, must be accepted, unless one quits one’s job.

However, the teacher cannot be reduced to a victim of circumstances. The members of a community align with the changes introduced in it and this requires negotiation (see Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). In this study, the teacher with her/his actions both supports and rejects changes, for example, by embracing opportunities to integrate new digital artefacts into the teaching, or by speaking up against locally proposed changes brought about by changes at the macro-level. In this way, and as other studies (e.g. Billett and Somerville 2004; Luttenberg et al. 2013) have pointed out, the teacher’s actions are both performed from what s/he is compelled to do and springing from her/his self-concept. Even if a societal change itself is not opposed, the teacher’s level of engagement in, and opinions of, what it will lead to locally, also contribute to the transformation of the teachers’ communities, and, thus, also in the continuation of her/himself.

**Negotiating change in regard to the local context and one’s individual trajectory**

The negotiation of the changes and their relationship to the teacher’s identity can, moreover, be understood in the light of the local school community to which the
teacher belongs. Nationally introduced changes are interpreted and implemented differently in each school context. The data from one of the schools in the study show that the response to proposed changes was highly collective. The members of the work team protested mutually against suggested changes, and by doing so they succeeded in preventing them. This deployment of collective agency supports the finding of Buchanan (2015) – that opposition towards a change is more efficient when the teachers are united in their alignment to a vision of the quality of teaching and learning.

A more individual way of negotiating change is reflected, particularly, in the data from the school at which the teachers had discussed leaving. In line with Vähäsantanen and Billett (2008) and Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto (2009), this shows that a teacher’s response to change can be explained from her/his current work situation, previous work experiences, and future prospects. However, this study illustrates that a teacher also uses arguments linked to her/his personal individual circumstances. Even if none of these teachers approved of the changes, and even if they were considering the same type of measure (leaving), they did not talk about it as a collective concern. It is possible that the practice of the local teacher community plays a role in determining whether change is primarily collectively or individually negotiated.

**Teachers’ competence is central in the negotiation of changes**

Generally, the teacher acquires, and must acquire, more competence when the conditions of the work are changed, for example learning to use digital tools in teaching and organising tasks centred around the teaching practice differently. In this sense, competence is something central in the negotiation of the changes. Moreover, the teacher draws on the regime of competence of the communities with which s/he aligns (see Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015) to embrace or oppose the changes introduced. Just as other studies (e.g. van Veen et al. 2005; Vähäsantanen and Billett 2008; Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto 2009) have shown, this study shows that changes are often negotiated with arguments related to one’s teaching and students. The teachers are guided in what it means to be a teacher by, for example, their conception of the students as emergent readers. Since the learners are considered to be in need of much support, both in their learning process and outside the classroom, a valued competence in the LESLLA teacher community is the capacity to exhibit a great degree of caring.

It is possible to understand the LESLLA teacher’s claims of competence when it is considered that this teacher group is one of many competing voices in the landscape of SFI education. The teacher experiences that s/he must struggle to get her/his knowledge recognized (see Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2015). This struggle is sometimes seen in regard to the principal and other groups of teachers within the local school, while in other situations, the teacher refers to decisions made at a higher level when claiming her/his competence. In their response to the changes, the teacher draws especially on her/his membership in the LESLLA teaching and teacher
communities, but in any case, the occurrence of struggles illustrates that the teacher’s expertise is not always considered in educational change.

**Implications**

This study has shown that migration, marketization and streamlining, and digitalization are three types of societal change that contribute to the teacher identity in second language education for adults. Not only do these issues change the teacher’s work practices, they also promote or challenge the teacher’s position in the local school communities and the overall landscape of SFI. These changes are transforming the professional identity by inspiring and/or forcing the teacher to change her/his actions and by their influence on the teacher’s position. But the teacher’s response to these challenges is crucial, too. By aligning to the changes in regard to the teaching and learning, highlighting the particular needs of the students and one’s own competence, and by demonstrating collective and/or individual agency, the teachers take active part in the transformation of their work communities, which, in turn, implies identity development.

Since it is challenging to constantly have to change because of external demands, and since societal changes transferred to the local level are of huge significance for the teaching and the teachers’ well-being, policymakers and educational leaders at national and regional levels must consider how a proposed overall educational change will affect also the teaching and the teacher. Moreover, it is crucial to create space for teachers to influence at a local level new conditions caused by societal changes. The teachers’ area-specific competence, whether concerning LESLLA teaching or other fields, should not be wasted. One should not underestimate the outcomes of change implemented by engaged teachers. A positive and active response is more likely to occur if the teacher feels that her/his professional expertise and ability to use it are taken into account.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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